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which has been published in final form at:  

http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4959.2007.00253_1.x  

Always use the definitive version when citing.  

Further information on publisher website: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com  

Date deposited: 5th December 2013  

Version of file: Author’s manuscript  

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We Have Something In Common: Introduction to Four Commentaries on ‘A Home Frome Home’

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ISBN: 0-316-73016-5; £17.99 (hbk) £10.99 (pbk)

The changing nature of the UK academy forces us to return to the question: what is a university for? Answers to such a question are often structured around a concept of ‘community’: ‘a community of scholars’ or a ‘learning community’. While there may be an emerging consensus about the communal nature of university life, there is rather less understanding of practical steps that may be taken to build a ‘community’. Indeed, as lecturing staff, we find ourselves subjected to many forces that would appear to foster fragmentation: differing disciplinary traditions, the structuring of degree programmes into individually-taught modules or the primacy placed on individual output for the research assessment exercise. At a time when our ability to communicate with one another is purportedly at its peak, the conception of the university as a community seems to have been eroded.

This set of commentaries emerges from an exercise designed to foster a sense of community at a UK university. Over the second half of the 2006-7 academic year we organised a Common Book Project across the Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty at Newcastle University. Our aim was to encourage as many staff and students as possible to read the same book. At its root was a desire to foster a shared experience and engagement. In this respect we sought a text that would foster interest across disciplinary traditions, between academic and administrative staff and amongst undergraduate and postgraduate students. But the choice was not simple a question of accessibility. We also sought to use the Common Book to provoke debate concerning key issues facing both universities and wider UK society, choosing to focus on questions of multiculturalism and ‘Britishness’. 
With these motivations in mind and following consultation with colleagues and students, we selected George Alagiah’s *A Home from Home* (Little Brown, 2006) as the inaugural Common Book. This accessible text became the focus of a number of events, from an open-invitation launch event, to smaller reading groups, through to the inclusion by some of *A Home from Home* in teaching materials. The project cumulated in May 2007 with a public lecture by George Alagiah at Newcastle where he discussed his inspirations and motivations for writing the book. This series of events generated debate on two fronts. The first centred on the content of Alagiah’s book, with inter-disciplinary perspectives weighing in on Alagiah’s arguments about the use of ‘multiculturalism’ as a government policy in contemporary Britain. In the four brief commentaries that follow, we have attempted to represent the breadth of this fruitful debate. We will not summarise their arguments here: suffice to say that each takes a distinctive critical perspective on Alagiah’s approach which prove valuable for geographers, from questions of his conceptions of identity (class, race, gender and sexuality) through to the implications of his argument for the contemporary political moment.

Second, the Common Book project generated significant debate as to the value of such an activity in contemporary universities. Should we all really need to read the same book? ‘Isn’t there something Orwellian about it?’ as one colleague remarked. This was countered by other colleagues who felt such a project was long overdue, and by student reactions that this sort of exchange and opportunity was what they had come to university hoping to find. While it is clearly beyond the remit of this piece to resolve such debate, we ultimately see this project as a horizontal, rather than top-down, attempt to foster shared experiences. And rather than being a self-contained single-year project, we view the Common Book as a long-term process of communication and engagement. It is in this spirit that we offer the following four commentaries.

Cathrine Degnen and Alex Jeffrey
Newcastle University, September 2007

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1 In realising the Common Book Project we are indebted to the assistance and support of the following Newcastle University staff: Carlos Calderon, Martin Farr, Deborah James, Liz Kemp,
Sarah Leary, Rachel Lofthouse, Rhiannon Mason, Katie Patel and Colin Riordan. We are also very grateful to George Alagiah for visiting the university and engaging so enthusiastically in the Common Book project.