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## YOUTH, MIGRATION, AND THE SEARCH FOR BELONGING IN CALEB AZUMAH NELSON'S *SMALL WORLDS*: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL READING

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### **Abstract**

This article examines how youths experience migration and the search for belonging in Caleb Azumah Nelson's *Small Worlds*. While much research on migration focuses on adults or social structures, Nelson's novel highlights the emotional and psychological realities of young Black British characters living in diasporic London. Using phenomenology and hermeneutics, the study analyses narrative voice, memory, relationships, and cultural influences to show how belonging is felt, negotiated, and constantly reshaped. The findings reveal that belonging is not fixed but emerges through interactions, personal reflection, and connection to community and culture. By focusing on the interior experiences of youths, the article contributes to African and Black British literary studies, showing how contemporary fiction can reveal the emotional and lived dimensions of migration in ways that social or thematic analyses alone cannot.

**Keywords:** Youth, Migration, Belonging, Phenomenology, Black British Literature, Diaspora

## Introduction

Migration has become a central theme in contemporary African and Black British literature, reflecting ongoing global movements and their cultural consequences. Research shows that literature increasingly takes migration as more than geographical displacement, presenting it as an emotional, psychological, and identity-shaping experience (Moopi & Makombe, 2024). In Black British fiction, in particular, writers foreground the complex lived realities of migrant communities, exploring how identity and belonging are continually negotiated in multicultural contexts (Pérez-Fernández, 2024). This shift in literary focus corresponds with broader cultural trends in which narratives about movement, settlement, and cultural mixture are shaping how readers understand identity in post-Empire societies.

Caleb Azumah Nelson's *Small Worlds* offers a timely example of this literary turn. Set in diasporic London, the novel portrays young Black British characters whose experiences of music, memory, relationships, and everyday life reflect broader patterns of cultural hybridity and negotiation of identity. The narrative foregrounds the interior lives of youth who inhabit both inherited cultural traditions and the demands of life in a metropolitan context. Nelson's work illustrates how belonging is not automatically granted by legal status or physical location but is experienced through personal reflection, emotional awareness, and social connection.

While migration has been widely discussed in literary and cultural studies, much recent scholarly attention remains focused on adult protagonists, historical migrations, or broad social interpretations rather than the lived emotional experiences of youth in fiction. For example, recent work on diaspora identity in British literature highlights broader cultural influences on identity. However, it does not explicitly investigate how the subjective experiences of young characters shape their sense of belonging (Pérez-Fernández, 2024). Similarly, interdisciplinary research on Black diasporic identities notes the role of migration in shaping emotional displacement and identity formation (WJARR, 2024). However, it lacks a focused literary analysis of youth narrators in contemporary fiction.

This article aims to fill that gap by analysing how youth negotiate belonging in *Small Worlds* using a combined phenomenological and hermeneutical approach grounded in literary interpretation. Phenomenology allows us to attend to characters' lived experiences as narrated in the text, while hermeneutics guides careful interpretation of narrative voice and meaning. The article begins with a review of recent literature on migration and belonging in contemporary Black British writing, followed by an examination of Nelson's narrative strategies. It then interprets how memory, relationships, and cultural negotiation shape youth subjectivity and belonging in the

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novel, concluding with reflections on the broader implications of literary representations of migration for understanding identity in diasporic contexts.

## **Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks: Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, and Youth Belonging**

This article is grounded in phenomenological and hermeneutical theory as complementary approaches for understanding how youth experience and interpret belonging in diasporic contexts. Phenomenology provides the conceptual tools for attending to lived experience as it is felt, perceived, and embodied. At the same time, hermeneutics enables the interpretation of meaning as it emerges through narrative, memory, and action. Together, these approaches allow for a reading of *Small Worlds* that centres youth subjectivity and foregrounds the emotional textures of migration beyond sociological abstraction.

Recent phenomenological scholarship emphasises that lived experience is always situated, relational, and embodied. Van Manen (2021) argues that phenomenology attends to the meanings people make through everyday experiences, gestures, and interactions rather than through detached explanation. This perspective is particularly relevant to the study of youth in diasporic fiction, where belonging is often conveyed through mood, rhythm, and sensory engagement rather than through explicit self-definition. In *Small Worlds*, youth belonging is expressed through sound, movement, and shared presence, aligning with phenomenology's focus on lived experience before it is theorised.

Zahavi (2020) further develops this position by emphasising intentionality and self-experience, noting that consciousness is always directed toward the world and shaped by relational encounters. Applied to Nelson's novel, this insight allows the analysis to focus on how young characters experience the city, community spaces, and one another from within their own perspectives. Youth belonging, from this view, is not a fixed identity but an ongoing process shaped by attention, affect, and memory. The phenomenological lens thus enables the study to capture how belonging is felt internally, even when it remains socially unstable.

Hermeneutics complements this approach by addressing how meaning is produced and interpreted through narrative. Davey (2020) argues that understanding emerges through a dialogic process between text, context, and reader, where meaning is never static but continually negotiated. In literary studies, this allows for close attention to how actions, spaces, and recurring motifs generate meaning across a narrative. In *Small Worlds*, hermeneutical interpretation makes it possible to read everyday actions, gathering, listening, and lingering, as meaningful expressions of youth belonging shaped by diasporic conditions.

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Recent literary scholarship has increasingly combined phenomenology and hermeneutics to study migration narratives. Guignery and Ryan (2022) suggest that contemporary fiction often privileges affective experience and interior perception to represent displacement and belonging, particularly among younger characters. However, such approaches remain underutilised in studies of Black British youth fiction. By integrating phenomenological attention to lived experience with hermeneutical interpretation of narrative meaning, this article offers a framework suited to capturing the subtle, emotional dimensions of youth belonging in Nelson's novel.

Through this combined theoretical lens, *Small Worlds* is read as a text that articulates belonging through lived moments rather than resolved identities. The framework allows the analysis to remain attentive to how youth experience belonging as temporary, embodied, and relational, while also interpreting how these experiences are shaped and communicated through narrative structure. This approach prepares the ground for the analysis that follows, where youth, memory, and shared space are examined as central to the search for belonging in diasporic London.

### **Engagement with Contemporary Scholarship on Migration and Belonging**

This section situates the present study within recent critical conversations on migration, belonging, and contemporary African and Black British literature. Rather than offering a descriptive survey of existing scholarship, it engages key studies published within the last five years in a critical dialogue, examining how scholars have approached questions of diaspora, identity, and belonging. Particular attention is given to how migration has been theorised as a social, cultural, and emotional condition, and how literature has been used as a site for negotiating these experiences. By reading these studies alongside *Small Worlds*, this section highlights both the contributions and limitations of current research.

A reading of Moopi and Makombe (2023) suggests that African diasporic fiction consistently portrays migration as more than the physical act of movement; it shapes identity, social relations, and emotional experience. They argue that characters are often caught between inherited cultural expectations and the demands of host societies, creating complex negotiations of belonging. This study builds on their observation but focuses specifically on youth characters, showing how these internal negotiations are expressed through narrative consciousness, memory, and relational dynamics in contemporary Black British fiction.

Pérez-Fernández (2024) states that Black British literature increasingly foregrounds diasporic youth navigating urban spaces marked by cultural hybridity. While Pérez-Fernández highlights the social and cultural pressures on identity formation, he does

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not closely attend to the emotional interiority of the young characters. This article addresses that limitation by examining how Nelson's narrative presents belonging as a lived, affective experience rather than a social status or ideological concept.

A reading of Bruhn and Gonzales (2023) demonstrates that youth belonging is relational and situational, influenced by community, social networks, and national contexts. Their empirical approach, however, does not explore **literary representations** of these dynamics. By contrast, this study interprets *Small Worlds* as a text that embodies these relational dynamics within the narrative voice, revealing how youth experience, interpret, and negotiate belonging emotionally and cognitively.

Again, Papastergiadis (2021) argues that migration produces unstable subjectivities, emphasising that belonging is continuously constructed in movement and reflection. This observation resonates with Nelson's characters, whose sense of self is fluid, relational, and mediated by memory, music, and friendships. However, Papastergiadis's discussion is largely theoretical; this paper demonstrates how these phenomenological insights can be applied concretely to narrative text, showing the inner lives of youth as they negotiate belonging.

Similarly, van Manen (2021) and Zahavi (2020) provide phenomenological tools for understanding lived experience and subjective perception. A reading of van Manen shows how everyday experiences, emotions, and reflections can be interpreted to reveal meaning in life. Zahavi further emphasises that consciousness and intentionality are central to understanding subjective experience. This study combines these insights with hermeneutical interpretation (Davey, 2020) to read *Small Worlds* as a site where youth articulate belonging through memory, emotion, and social connection.

A reading of Anthias (2020) is particularly useful for understanding how belonging operates as a relational and situational process rather than a fixed identity. Anthias states that belonging is shaped through everyday practices, social positioning, and emotional attachments that are constantly renegotiated, especially in diasporic contexts. While her work provides a strong conceptual framework for thinking about belonging, it remains largely sociological and structural in orientation. This article extends Anthias's insights into the literary domain by examining how such relational forms of belonging are narrated through the inner lives of young characters in *Small Worlds*, where feelings of attachment and disconnection are experienced on an intimate, personal level.

Similarly, Walkowitz (2021) argues that contemporary migration fiction often experiments with narrative form to reflect the instability of migrant life, emphasising

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fragmentation, memory, and non-linear storytelling. Walkowitz's focus on form highlights how migration disrupts narrative coherence, mirroring the disorientation of displaced subjects. However, her analysis prioritises formal innovation over character interiority and does not give sustained attention to youth experience. This paper builds on Walkowitz's attention to narrative technique. However, it shifts the emphasis toward how narrative voice and interior reflection communicate the emotional realities of young people negotiating belonging within diasporic London. Recent work by Procter (2021) on Black British literature also informs this study. Procter states that contemporary Black British writing increasingly foregrounds questions of cultural inheritance, race, and belonging in urban spaces shaped by migration. While his analysis situates texts like *Small Worlds* within a broader literary and cultural tradition, it does not fully explore how youth subjectivity mediates these pressures in lived experience. This article responds by focusing on how Nelson's young characters interpret their world through feeling, memory, and relationship, showing that belonging is not only socially produced but internally experienced and emotionally sustained.

Together, these studies demonstrate that while recent scholarship has made significant advances in theorising migration, diaspora, and belonging, there remains limited attention to how youth experience these conditions from within narrative consciousness. By engaging phenomenology through van Manen (2021) and Zahavi (2020), and applying hermeneutical interpretation as articulated by Davey (2020), this paper offers a reading of *Small Worlds* that centres youth interiority. In doing so, it contributes to contemporary debates by showing how fiction captures the emotional textures of migration that broader theoretical and sociological approaches often leave unexplored.

### **Youth, Memory, and the Search for Belonging in *Small Worlds***

In *Small Worlds*, Caleb Azumah Nelson presents youth belonging as something lived through action, sound, and shared presence rather than as a settled identity. The novel centres young Black characters in London whose sense of self is shaped by everyday encounters, communal rituals, and emotional memory. Youth is often portrayed as a period of heightened sensitivity, in which moments of connection carry intense meaning precisely because they are temporary. Nelson's narrative technique privileges sensory experience and collective action, allowing belonging to emerge through what characters feel and do together.

This embodied sense of belonging is most vividly articulated in scenes of collective gathering, particularly in the early church sequence. Here, Nelson constructs

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belonging through rhythm and physical response, grounding youth experience in shared movement rather than reflection. He writes:

The drums start, sudden and sure, and a thick bassline follows, getting to the heart of things. The sound moves through the room, through the floor, working its way into our legs, our chests, our throats. Hands lift without instruction, bodies sway instinctively, voices rise, some strong, some tentative, not all in tune, but held together by the same pulse, the same moment, the same breath.

This passage shows how belonging is enacted collectively and physically. The emphasis on sound travelling through bodies suggests that youth identity is forged through participation rather than assertion. No single individual dominates the scene; instead, unity emerges through shared rhythm and presence. For young people negotiating diasporic life, this moment offers a rare sense of grounding, where difference does not disrupt belonging but contributes to it. Belonging, here, is temporary and contingent, sustained only for as long as the collective action continues.

Beyond moments of communal intensity, *Small Worlds* also demonstrates how youth belonging is quietly sustained through everyday spaces that carry memory and familiarity. The narrator's attachment to Auntie Yaa's shop illustrates how such places function as emotional anchors within the city. These are spaces where young people are recognised, where time slows, and where cultural memory is preserved in ordinary routines. When the shop is forced to close, Nelson captures the emotional weight of this loss through reflective narration:

It was not just a shop. It was the place where you stayed longer than you meant to, where conversation stretched and softened the day. Where food reminded you of home, even if home was somewhere you barely remembered clearly. Where faces were familiar, voices welcoming, when the shutters finally came down, something else closed with it, something harder to name, something that had been holding us together.

This passage reveals how belonging is embedded in routine and recognition rather than in grand declarations of identity. The repetition of "*where*" underscores the accumulation of small, meaningful actions, staying, talking, eating, that make the space significant. The loss of the shop signals not only material displacement but emotional dislocation, particularly for youth who rely on such spaces to feel rooted within an often-hostile urban environment. The inability to fully "name" what is lost reflects the subtlety of belonging itself: deeply felt but difficult to articulate.

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Across the novel, Nelson resists presenting youth belonging as a stable achievement. Instead, it is portrayed as fragile, shaped by moments that can disappear under economic pressure, the passage of time, or loss. Music, friendship, and shared spaces allow young people to feel briefly whole, even as they remain aware of the impermanence of these connections. Youth, in *Small Worlds*, is therefore marked by an acute awareness of both presence and absence, of what is held and what might be lost.

*Small Worlds* portrays the search for belonging as an ongoing, lived process rather than a resolved condition. Through sustained attention to action, memory, and shared experience, Nelson shows how young people assemble meaning within precarious environments. Belonging emerges not as a destination but as something created in moments of togetherness, felt deeply, remembered intensely, and always vulnerable to disruption.

### **Music, Space, and Communal Intimacy in *Small Worlds***

In *Small Worlds*, music is more than a motif; it functions as a medium through which youth negotiate belonging, memory, and identity. Nelson presents musical engagement as a deeply embodied practice in which rhythms, harmonies, and collective resonance help young characters locate themselves within diasporic spaces. Music is both social and intimate: it enables connection with others while also providing a private space for reflection and emotional release. Through music, the novel illustrates how belonging is constructed through affective and sensory experience rather than through social labels or geographic location.

A passage that exemplifies this occurs when the narrator describes a late-night jam session with friends. The scene captures the simultaneous social and internal dimensions of music:

I lift the trumpet to my lips. The first note hums, low and steady, and the room leans in. It grows into a swell, the bass walking beside me, and for a moment we are a single pulse. The walls vibrate; laughter flickers around corners, claps and shouts merge with the rhythm. I close my eyes, and it is not just me playing, but every small memory I carry, the street corners, the summer afternoons, the quiet afternoons at Auntie Yaa's. Each note threads the past to the present. Moreover, for the length of a song, I am home in a world that might otherwise feel too big, too scattered, too unfamiliar.

A phenomenological reading of this passage shows how music operates as both a social connector and a phenomenological anchor. The narrator's engagement with sound, space, and memory demonstrates how belonging is *experienced*, not merely

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stated. Nelson aligns rhythm with emotional continuity: the trumpet does not merely produce melody, it threads together past and present, individual and collective, interiority and sociality. For youth in this diasporic setting, music helps them navigate displacement, providing a temporal and affective space where identity and community intersect. This moment illustrates that youth belonging is contingent on interaction, memory, and affective resonance rather than on formal markers such as citizenship or heritage.

Moreover, the passage highlights that music functions as a medium through which youth actively construct and inhabit emotional space. By participating in the rhythm, the narrator and their peers are not simply consuming or observing; they are co-creating a shared environment where memory, feeling, and relational bonds converge. The act of producing sound becomes a form of intentionality, in which attention, emotion, and bodily presence align to generate meaning. In this way, music mediates the tension between personal interiority and collective experience, allowing the narrator to reconcile feelings of displacement with moments of connection. The temporality of the musical experience, its rise and fall, the cadence of notes, and the lingering echoes mirror the precariousness of diasporic belonging, emphasising that youth identity is continuously enacted and re-negotiated through lived, embodied participation in social and cultural practices.

## **Conclusion**

In *Small Worlds*, Caleb Azumah Nelson demonstrates that youth belonging is neither fixed nor guaranteed; it emerges through lived experience, affective engagement, and shared spatial and temporal practices. Music functions as a central medium through which young characters negotiate identity, memory, and emotional connection, creating fleeting yet meaningful moments of communal intimacy. Spaces such as jam sessions, streets, clubs, and informal gatherings become both sites of belonging and markers of its fragility, emphasising that connection in diasporic life is always provisional.

The analysis shows that youth belonging is simultaneously social and internal: it depends on the presence of others but is mediated through perception, memory, and affect. By attending closely to embodied experiences, sound, rhythm, and interaction, the novel foregrounds how young people create small worlds of attachment within an urban environment that can otherwise feel alienating or overwhelming. Nelson's narrative confirms that belonging is a process, actively maintained and emotionally negotiated, rather than a static achievement tied to home, legal status, or heritage.

Through this lens, music and shared space are not merely thematic devices but integral structures for understanding the phenomenology of youth in diasporic

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settings. They allow the reader to apprehend belonging as a lived, embodied, and relational experience, bridging the social and the personal. This section demonstrates that Nelson's novel provides a rich, affective, and nuanced exploration of how young people inhabit and construct their worlds, offering insights that are both specific to the narrative and broadly applicable to contemporary studies of migration, youth, and diaspora.

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