

PLACE ATTACHMENT AND THE MEANING OF HOME FOR IMMIGRANTS

Lystra Huggins

Freshman Year Program, Medgar Evers College, CUNY (USA)

Abstract

The physical and psychological aspects of the meaning of 'home' have been studied extensively; however, studies in this area relating to place attachment for immigrants leave room for further research. While most individuals throughout their lives have had multiple homes, for immigrants specifically it has meant establishing those homes in more than one country. The idea that immigrants have their feet planted in two or more places suggests they may also be attached to more than one home. In reality, some immigrants live the rest of their lives in their host country, while others feel a need to return to their place of birth—their homeland—due to place attachment. Those latter individuals feel a strong desire to reconnect to loved ones, childhood places, and memories 'back home.' The purpose of this research is to explore the meaning of home for immigrants who have had multiple homes through a collection of stories of migration and remigration. As the return migrants share their stories, the shared and diverse lived experiences and place attachments will distinctively reveal their meaning of home.

Keywords: *Place attachment, meaning of home, immigrant experiences, remigration.*

1. Introduction

The common saying, 'Home is where your heart is,' resounds loudly for immigrants. Many immigrants struggle as they work, create families, and form social connections in two countries. The juxtaposing of learning a new culture, food, and sometimes language can take adjusting even as we live in a global world. It is never a straightforward decision to migrate, and even when the immigrant has acculturated into the host country, they can still yearn to return to their original homeland. This yearning for home propels many immigrants to remigrate. It is not about failure in the host country or wanting to display success; it is what Carol B. Stacks (1996) coined "A Call to Home."

The migration experiences have been scoffed and scorned in our society, so much so they do not highlight the value of immigrants. Immigrants are invested in every facet of everyday life. They are babysitters, housekeepers, cooks, taxi drivers, professors, lawyers, and doctors. Their goal is not to take from the community or where they live (as is popularly believed) but to become successful so they can give back to their many communities both abroad and at home. Some immigrants live the rest of their lives in their host countries, while others must return to their place of birth – their homeland (Berry, 1997). Remigration, or return migration as it is commonly known, points to immigrants who have left their homeland, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, to live in another place, then at a later point move back to their homeland (Gmelch, 1980). To some, the decision was positive and exhilarating; to others, it was difficult; and to a few, the jury is still out as they cope with the effects of remigration. This collection of stories is written in authentic language and attempts to stress the lived experiences of successful immigrants who returned 'home'.

2. Design

The design of this research is not in a typical qualitative research format. The method used was based on the interviews from my dissertation research of the lived experiences of immigrants who immigrated to the United States from Trinidad and Tobago and remigrated to their homeland after living there for over ten (10). These collections of stories had many threads in common, but the one that ran through all the stories was the idea of place attachment. Many of these remigrants were still attached to their childhoods' physical and cultural places (Trinidad and Tobago). They all mentioned the food, the norms, the house, and the flora and fauna of their surroundings—the place attachments to home continue to live in them. In searching for a definition of home, Michel (2017) states that ". . . home can denote

physical dwelling, family household, material possessions, as well as geographical and social connections, but these words only hint at the emotional dimensions of the English word home and its cousins in German, Danish, Swedish, Icelandic, and Dutch. In these languages home connotes much more than geography and material reality; home also describes an emotional state of being" (p. 20). That desire for home is the reason many immigrants return. You hear that attachment and longing in the following story's local language and words.

3. Method

3.1. Hear the Whispers of a Remigrant¹

Why did I return to Trinidad after spending all my adult life in New York? The answer is simple: Trinidad is home. I missed the people, food, music, and most of all the 'limin' and the way we do talk. I missed the aura of respectability of how people address each other—some people may say it is a bit formal, but I like it. I subscribe to the philosophy that we should respect our elders and that in order for respect to be given, it must be shown. Like when you walked in, you addressed me as Mr. Smith. I like that even though I prefer to be called, "Baritone" because that is my nickname here. Everyone says that I have a pleasant, baritone voice. I have also heard that my voice is distinctive and powerful. At one time, I wanted to be an opera singer in the US, but that wasn't to be. The truth is that I was a radio announcer in the US for a period of time and now volunteer as one in Trinidad.

While I have a few meetings; today, it is still the best day of the week. I carved out 2-3 hours just for you. I know you hired a car to come to me in Point Fortin, so ah bubble ah pot fuh allyuh so that you and the driver could eat something while allyuh here. I know you will have a 3 hours trip back to Arima and I don't want you stopping to buy nothing to eat. Like everybody who visited here, I hope you like Point Fortin area. It is very country-like—single lane traffic and plenty, plenty fruit trees. I am sure you would have noticed all the mango trees, avocado trees, cashew trees, tamarind trees, chennete trees, guava trees, plum trees and all the others lining the roadway. People always comment that they are amazed at the mansions down this end of the country. Plenty people down here are second generation who rebuilt their parents' homes so you would find that the houses are fairly new. As you may know, the southern area of Trinidad is very rich in natural resources, and it is where the country extracts much of its oil, natural gas, and asphalt.

I left Trinidad after secondary school to further my education in the States. I have an aunt and cousins living in Brooklyn and my parents thought that it would be a good opportunity to stay with them. So I left when I was 17 years old—to be exact. I went to college and earned my Bachelor's degree in Mass Communications. I met a beautiful African American woman in Brooklyn and we got married when I was 29 years old. I have 2 lovely daughters who were born in the States and are now in their thirties. Them sweet too bad. In total, I lived abroad for 43 years and owned a house in Long Island. My wife and I divorced in 2002. We had a good marriage but would quarrel plenty when it comes to our cultures. She would say, "you are always talking about Trinidad, Trinidad, Trinidad when it is America that made you who you are today." While I agreed with her to some extent, it was Trinidad that gave me my values. I am a real Trini. In one of our many arguments she said, "Well if your little island is so wonderful, why are you living here in America?" I looked at her in anger, real vex but it triggered something in me; and I began to think she had a point. Her question made me realize I had to return and it became an all-consuming passion. She real open my eye with that question.

I was not emotionally ready to leave New York though. I stayed for many years after that because I wanted to be a constant figure in my daughters' lives. They were 11 and 13 years old at the time and I did not want to be away from them for any extended length of time. I left when they were both in college. Today, one of my daughters lives in Queens, New York, and the other one is married and lives with her family in Maryland; I travel back to the States twice a year to celebrate their birthdays and to spend time with my grandchildren.

As God would have it, I was forced to return sooner than I like. My mum was sick and I found out on one of my usual Sunday morning calls to her that she was not doing well and wanted to see me. Later that day when I spoke to my aunt, she let me know that her sister had cancer. This hit me like a ton of bricks. It real mash meh up. I was confused—angry—lost. So without giving it too much thought, I packed up and left the US immediately. . .leaving everything behind. A year after coming back, moms passed away. It was the most difficult time of my life—seeing the pain she was having and slowly seeing her leave me. Everytime I talk about her my pores does still raise.

On that flight back home to see my mother, I met a woman on the plane and we had a great conversation. This woman was born and grow up in England, but had family in Trinidad. We exchanged

¹ The spelling or structure of the story – the way of speaking was not changed.

numbers and continued talking during the year that I spent with my mother. Right after my moms died, we got married. When I study how fast we get married, I am not sure if I truly loved her, or if it was because I had just lost my mother and felt a need to be comforted. She was there for me every step of the way during this most difficult period of my life and I may have confused empathy for love. She left England and we started a life in this same house here.

Four years into the marriage, my new wife was having difficulty adjusting to living in Trinidad. She had never lived in the Caribbean and complained about everything... the crime, the customer service, the lackadaisical attitude of people, and lack of what she would consider nice places to 'hang out' after work besides 'rum shops'. I told her the kind of places she wanted to go, she would need to go to quite Chaguanas or Port of Spain and both were too far from here Point Fortin. I bought this house as an investment property in 1986 while I was living in New York. It is now worth 6 million TT dollars. My wife decorated the house when she moved in so this is all her design. Still, she didn't like living here. We talked about it and she wanted us to go to England to live, but I love my Trinidad, so she went to England, and I stayed home in Trinidad. It didn't work out and although I miss her, I had to make another adjustment. I now focus on improving the lives of them youth in the area. I believe it is my mission and calling for the rest of my life. I have no regrets about migrating to the US, or remigrating to Trinidad and Tobago. This is where I want to spend the rest of my life. The US had my life—but Trinidad have my soul.

4. Conclusion

This is just one story of the thousands of individuals who have migrated from their home country, assimilated, and remigrated after years of successful professional lives. The notion of home has been discussed as it relates to displacement. However, for the many immigrants who have a choice to stay or return home, those individuals return because of the connection to their homeland's culture, norms, and physical space. Marcus (1992), in her chapter in the book *Place Attachment*, explains that "we hold onto childhood memories of certain places as a kind of psychic anchor, reminding us of where we came from, of what we once were, or of how the environment nurtured us when family dynamics were strained. Whatever befalls us in later life, those memories remain" (p. 89). Returning to the place one lived in early childhood or the place one identifies as "home" has not been researched extensively. In fact, "traditionally, immigration scholars have tended to analyze population flows as unidirectional: Migrants leave the sending society, immigrate and settle in the host society, and eventually assimilate" (Tsuda, 2009; p. 8). The story in this paper is one of many stories that capture the experiences of both migration and remigration. Migration is understood as a journey to create a better life; however, the nuances of remigration or return migration need more researchers to listen to the whispers of place attachment and the pull of home from actual return migrants.

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