Transnational Villagers: St Helenian Perspectives of ‘Home’

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**Important Note:** The narratives contained within this presentation was sought through casual conversations with Facebook friends. Approval was given to include their views.
Coming home

• The final voyage on the RMS St Helena
• Traditional and cultural shifts
• Barriers of access
Purpose

- A sociological and/or psychological snapshot of perspectives of home
- A research proposal to facilitate discussion between the disciplines that examine the keenly contested and complex meaning of home
- A prominent but unexplored theme in my doctoral research
- Personal narratives conducted over the years and refreshed recently through social media
The transnational St Helenian’s perspective of ‘home’

Most St Helenians want to come home: rhetoric or reality?
What is ‘home’?

Home is not just place(s), space(s), feeling(s), practice(s) but it also relates to the activity performed by, with or in persons, things and places.
What is home?

• ... a central *place* to which you and your thoughts constantly return.
• a group of *people* without whom your life would cease to have meaning (Michael Jackson, 1995:66)
• ... a place of origin (however recent or relative) as well as a point of destination.
• ... a repository for complex, inter-related and at times socio-cultural ideas about people’s relationship with one another, especially family, and with places, spaces and things.
It all depends ...

‘on any given time’,

‘on any given person’

(Hollander, 1991)
• The Western habit of thinking of a home as a house
• Individual rooms give us a sense of privacy
• Walls and rooms synonymous with being civilised
• A *habitus* of walls (Bourdieu)

Consider: “I need to go home, to my house.”
The conversations ...

- ‘both a place and a person’
- ‘where my family is’
- ‘the place that we built together and all that is left after one of us passed’
- ‘great to remember but impossible to live there’
- ‘too expensive to live any more’
Home and family

• Home and family – inter-related and overlapping terms?
• The birth family or family of origin
• An affinity towards others of one’s kind: one’s close kin, or someone dear to one’s heart
• The family relationships and life courses enacted within these spaces
• The place where children are nurtured and reared and finally depart when they come of age
• Without the family a home is ‘only a house’
• The relationship between home and family can change over the course of an individual life or in different spatial contexts
• At some points in a person’s life it may be pivotal, but at others it may be largely irrelevant
Family structures

• Changing patterns in partnership, parenthood
• Traditional conceptions of family such as the **nuclear family** is becoming can no longer be sustained at the centre of debates about family and family life
• The reach of the market into family life, to the ‘commodification’ of intimacies and love (Hochschild, 2003)
• The complex and contradictory relationship between contemporary practices, change and betterment and the making and shaping of family life (Lindsay and Maher, 2013)
• The **transnational family** is fast growing
Q: Is this the case in St Helena?
Q: Are children ‘short-changed’ as parents work and goods are being used to substitute parental attention?
New family structure

Nuclear family
- Single income (father main breadwinner)
- Dual income (mothers in paid work)

Migratory working mothers
- Father and males migrated for work
- Mothers and women migrate for work

Transnational family
- Grandparents and kinship care
- Whole family migration
Home as a space

• Our incipient sense of space lies in the fluid movement between attachment and loss, separation and reunion, distance and nearness.

• A ‘kind of space’ affected by our relationship or bond to, or with a house or to landscape (Mary Douglas, 1991).

• A physical space that is lived – a space that is an ‘expression of social meanings and identities’ (Massey, 1992).

• Social and intimate relationship between a part of the world a person calls ‘self’ and a part of the world he or she sees as ‘other’.

• Permeable boundaries between home & self and home & away.

• Being local - the lived experience of locality (Brah, 1996)
Home as a place

• Place attachment (Rollero, 2010) – the propensity to remain where they feels safe and comfortable
• The birth place
• The location of the ‘family’ or ‘childhood’ home
• The house or dwelling that a person lived in immediately after birth - the childhood house
• Ownership of a dwelling – home/property ownership a source personal identity and status (Bourdieu)
• The **transnational family** is fast growing.

**Q:** Is home as a place more meaningful to St Helenians because we build homes for life?
Home as a feeling

- The sense of being perfectly understood by someone else, so that the person you are to yourself and the person you are to the other is, for a moment, one and the same
- Identification?
- ‘Longing for …’
- ‘Feeling that something is missing and then discovering it.
- Comfort foods, smells, sounds
The relationship between home and memory

- Is complex and fluid
- Experiences and memories vary at different stages of the life cycle
- Our inner child
- Varying kinship and household configurations
- A unique eternal truth of an (actual or imagined/remembered) place or home – to be used as a reference whether now or in the past. (Doreen Massey, 1992;1994)
Perspectives of home may be...

- real
- ideal
- actual
- remembered

There is no single simple “authenticity” (Doreen Massey, 1992;1994)
Home as a practice

• The way we ‘do’ home
• Routinised activities
‘… in different societies, people work in reality and through illusion and in concert with others to shape their own lives’.

Michael Jackson (1995:123) At Home in the World
‘Where is home for you?’

• ‘Home will always be St Helena but I can’t live there.’
• ‘My roots are in St Helena but my home is here.’
• ‘Where my children and grandchildren live.’
• ‘I have a house in St Helena but home is here [UK].’
• ‘Where I now work.’
Where do they go?

- United Kingdom
- Ascension
- Falkland Islands
- Germany
- Oman
- America
- The Congo
- Afghanistan
- Cuba
- France
- Norway
Leaving home

• Common expectation that young people will leave the birth/family home
• Most establish an independent place of their own without severing all ties to their birth family or family dwelling
• Rites of passage
• Feminised outflows
• Existentially, whatever the goal – spiritual illumination, scientific knowledge, material wealth – we leave for betterment.
Leaving

• The conditions under which people leave their homelands, their journeys beyond and away from home and their destinations are all said to impact on their identity and understanding of home.

• The pathway taken out of home, whether chosen or imposed, is often crucial in how their (past, present and future) homes are identified and defined (Jones, 1995; Wardaugh, 1999)
Those who leave and those who stay

It is not simply a question then of those who stay at home, and those who leave, as if these two different trajectories simply lead people to different places. Rather ‘homes’ always involve encounters between those who stay, those who arrive and those who leave … There is movement and dislocation within the very forming of homes as complex and contingent spaces of inhabitance.

(Ahmed, 1999:340)
St Helena’s migration flows

Q: How does change in outward flows affect such a ‘home space’?

Q: Does the higher propensity of whole families relocating instead as single individuals from each family take away the intensive coming and going or circular migration, that has been a part of local family life for as long as I can remember and longer?
The conversations indicated ...

- Certain they would return at ... [a set time]  ‘I’m sure I will return’
- Accepts they will return at some point ...  ‘I will return to retire’
- Leaving the door open with the idea of returning
- Convinced (or resigned to the idea) they would never return to live and work ...  ‘I don’t think I’ll ever return’ or  ‘I don’t even consider it’
- The likelihood and possibility of returning is not very appealing –  ‘Returning is an impossible dream’.
- ‘Fond memories, proud of roots but I can’t see a life in St Helena any more.’
• Education – ‘there is nothing for my son’
• Health – ‘my (dependent) has (a complex health condition) and s/he wouldn’t get the essential care’
• Housing – ‘prices are too high, we couldn’t buy now’
• Cost of living – ‘we tried going home to stay and it’s all too expensive, we couldn’t cope’ (a young couple)

Consider:
Sometimes the contribution we can make is better made/ valued/ understood abroad ... the earth is one country, so all part of the same thing ...”

(Wise words from a trusted colleague)
Being at home in the world

• Not being local

• ‘Planting yourself and blossoming …’

• A state of being which is not necessarily bounded by a physical location

• ‘… describe how in different societies, people work-in reality and through illusion, alone and in concert with others – to shape the course of their own lives Michael Jackson (1995) in At Home in the World

• We often feel at home in world when what we do have some effect and what we say carries some weight (Jackson, 1995:123)
Danger, fear, insecurity

Privacy, safety, security

Comfort, refuge

Home as a Haven

A regenerative space

Consider:
Advantages/disadvantages of coming home to heal in a small community setting?
The conversations indicated ...

• ‘I go home when I’m low’
• ‘When I was made redundant and had to give up my flat’
• ‘I went home when my marriage broke up’
• ‘Where I go when it all goes wrong’
• ‘If it all goes wrong and I fail, I still have a home to go back to’
And sometimes home is not a haven

- This dichotomy of the ‘inside’ or enclosed domain of the home being a comfortable, secure and safe space.
- Idealised, romanticised and even nostalgic notion of home is sometimes at odds with reality
- The significant percentage of women, children and young people who are subject to violence and (sexual) abuse in the home

Q: Whilst family can shelter does the island offer the supportive framework for survivors who come home to heal?
Home, self, identity and being

• Home may simply be a space where people feel at ease and are able to express and fulfil their unique selves or identities

• An emotional environment, a culture, a geographical location, a political system, a historical time and place, a house and a combination of all of the above

• The Jungian ‘collective unconscious’

• The Rogerian ‘inner child’ and the self and the other and our place in relationship

• Martin Buber – ‘home is being-with-others’
Bricks, sticks and straw

• Heidegger (1971) stresses the importance of building or making to our notion of home and very existence
  • integrally associated with and arise out of our capacity to dwell
• The lack of social housing forces a high proportion of the population to build new, privately-owned houses.
• More than 70% of housing is privately owned
• A prime indicator of wealth is owning property (Ribas-Mateos, 2000)
• St Helenians are socially aspirant - their houses are symbolic of prospering and success
Empty mansions

• Migratory work allowed women and mothers to either qualify for a mortgage or save to purchase a house - unachievable from most local wages.
• New homes stand empty, waiting for their owners to return from abroad.
• Refusal to rent
• Property ownership is a necessity but also an investment and status symbol.
• However, the newer, bigger, smarter house was symbolic of escaping hardship and a statement of success and achievement.
• Migrant workers in the Caribbean and India have bigger, sturdier and better housing - ownership of land and houses was an insurance of wealth and status in their homelands (Bolognani, 2007; Gulati, 1993; Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991).
Conversations on the journey home

• We need to live in our house for a bit
• I miss my house
• I’m not ready to go home but I (my spouse) just want to go home
• It’s a tough life at home
• I can’t wait to get home
• There’s no place like home.
Human beings are homemakers. We make homes. Not necessarily by constructing them, although some people do that. We build the intimate shell of our lives by the organisation and furnishing of the space in which we live. How we function as persons is linked to how we make ourselves at home. We need time to make our dwelling into a home ... Our residence is where we live, but our home is **how** we live.

(Ginsberg, 1998:31)
Implications and the way ahead

To better understand the processes and views on what home means to islanders, specifically St Helenians:

• A larger sample that is spread over many ‘host’ countries;
• Research questions that follow the trajectories that this paper merely touches on
  • Place attachment
  • Place identification (Rollero et al, 2010)
• Research conducted over a longer time period.
References


