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# Sharing Stories of Familiar Places and the Emotional Geographies of Family Travel back 'Home'

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# Sharing Stories of Familiar Places and the Emotional Geographies of Family Travel back 'Home'

## Introduction

As of May 2016, travel by Canadians overseas rose by 1.9% from April, with 990 000 trips in May alone (Statistics Canada, 2016). Travel to overseas countries by Canadians has increased since 2002 by 86.2% (Statistics Canada, 2011). Almost half of these trips are longer than 14 nights and consist of Canadians visiting friends and relatives (Statistics Canada, 2011). It is likely true that many of these international longer trips overseas by Canadians are their return trip 'home'. Interestingly, travel to Canada by residents of overseas countries decreased by 2.3% from April 2016 to May 2016; a factor that may concern both scholars and practitioners alike (Statistics Canada, 2016). If more Canadians are traveling overseas visiting family in their countries of origin, than it could mean fewer international Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) travelers visiting Canada.

Williams and Hall (2002) argue Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) tourism is an outgrowth of migration and has the capacity to generate new migration and mobility flows. Researchers examining relationships between VFR and return migration (Ali & Holden, 2006; Guarnizo, 1996; Duval, 2003) identify characteristics (gender, class) and motivations (visit family) for returning to countries of origin and how these trips maintain cultural values, build networks and relationships among family and friends between both regions. Despite this interest by scholars in the tourism-migration nexus (Williams & Hall, 2002), there is still very little academic attention in tourism on family travel of migrants specifically and in terms of the return trip 'home' (Schanzel, Yeoman & Backer, 2012). Pearce (2012) conceptualizes Visiting Home and Familiar Places (VHFP) travel and integrates it to human emotions and memory providing several studies that employ varied paradigms of inquiry and a range of familiar and innovative methods.

A focus on mobility in the social sciences is a result of the increasingly prevalent movement of, not just people, but materials, products, culture, ideas, images and information and whether this movement of "things" is either beneficial or harmful to specific groups (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Tourism can be conceptualized as a temporary or cyclical form of migration and situated on a time/space continuum with other types of human movements of varying duration (Williams & McIntyre, 2012; Hall, 2005). Whilst the mobilities turn has spurred new tourism research explorations into lifestyle mobilities, lifestyle migration, and amenity migration, very little attention has been given to the relationship between tourism, family travel, and migration (Duncan, Cohen & Thulemark, 2013; Williams & Hall, 2002; Schanzel, Yeoman & Backer, 2012). Travel has several deeper benefits for families, relationships and the individual (Durko & Petrick, 2013). Given recent influxes of migrant mobilities across the globe, especially those of the marginalized, this is a concern worthy of further exploration.

This paper specifically focuses on the varying conceptualizations of emotional bonds with place; that being the country of origin for one multi-generational migrant family who repeatedly travels back 'home' to Cyprus. Using a framework of emotional geographies, the study investigates tourism, migration and the mobilities paradigm in addressing multiple and increasingly varied conceptualizations of identity, place and belonging. The research attempts to create dialogue on an ever-expanding 'segment' of tourism in North America; that of the return trip 'home' of migrants.

## Literature

### *Migration, Tourism and the Return Trip 'Home'*

Discourse among tourism and migration scholars has debated the conceptual understanding of return migration and the definition of migrants and tourists (O'Reilly, 2003; Duval, 2004; Sinatti, 2011). However, tourism research has contributed less to the discussion on return migration and travel to and from the country of origin; a subject covered more directly through studies on migration. Many

*transmigrants* today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders developing and maintaining multiple relationships – familial, economic, social, organizational, religious and political (Basch *et al*, 1997). Researchers acknowledge the distinct situation of *transnational* practices especially return travel for first or second generation migrants and the behaviour of these migrants (e.g. Kanno, 1995; Zinn, 2005; Graham & Khosravi, 1997; Kaftnaglu & Timothy, 2013). The transnational family implies dynamics, flux and change but is also embedded in emotions and feelings of belonging (Reynolds, 2008; Skrbis, 2008). Transnational practices are complex and multigenerational, involving different patterns for young adults, those in their middle years and elderly (Kobayashi & Preston, 2007). Migration is undertaken strategically at different stages of the life cycle (Ley & Kobayashi, 2005). But to date, transnational studies have yet to focus specifically on tourism-related phenomena such as the return trip ‘home’ for VHFP travel. Moreover, the emotional experiences of these trips has yet to be acknowledged in either migration studies or tourism-related research.

### *Emotional Geographies*

Within tourism literature, emotions or affect have been investigated in conjunction with tourist behavior such as destination image, intention to visit, motivations, and satisfaction (e.g. Goossens, 2000; White & Scandale, 2005). More recent attention in tourism with regard to emotions relates to tourist experiences at specific destinations (e.g. Carnicello-Filho, Schwartz, & Tahara, 2010). Urry (2005) focuses on the consumption of tourist places and how specific sites are constructed in ways saturated with emotion, sometimes wild and frightening, sometimes aesthetically pleasing and relaxing, and sometimes dependent on ideas of rootedness. However, depth of emotions and how they relate to return migrants place experiences has remained unexplored (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010).

Emotions are universal throughout human cultures, are not easily defined, measured or singled out, and are often combined together in various degrees (Ekman, 1999; Plutchick, 1980). They are also highly subjective, related to each individual’s experience and multi-dimensional (Hockenbury & Hockenbury, 2007). The ‘emotional turn’ in geography results from positive recognition that emotions already have an important place in our own and others’ work (Bondi, Davidson & Smith, 2005). It privileges people’s expressed emotional experiences, and treats their accounts as open, honest, and genuine (Pile, 2010). An emotional geography attempts to understand emotion – experientially and conceptually – in terms of its socio-spatial mediation and articulation rather than as entirely interiorized mental status (Bondi *et al*, 2005). It is geography that charters the sensory and affective qualities of place as shown in the character, arrangement and interrelations of place and such elements as people and heritage; as made up of oral traditions, relationships and kinship, moral obligation, narratives, daily lives and ritual performance (Kearney, 2009). Emotional experiences rarely surface as critical components of migration and tourism scholarship yet often such aspects are implicit in the range of challenges faced by individuals and families who travel to familiar places (Wood, McGrath & Young, 2012).

### **Method**

We need a new design for empirical research, one that suits the political, social and cultural realities of plural societies (Berry, 1979). A subjective ontology and critically constructivist epistemology drives the application of narrative analysis as the over-arching methodological approach in this study on return migrant travel. Justification for this stems from the realization that narratives, in other words storytelling, may in fact be one of the most valuable ways to allow themes and realizations to emerge (Glover *et al*, 2008). The role of stories extends far beyond conveying a scholarly message; stories convey news, history, gossip and shared cultural experiences and help both adults and children deal with psychological challenges, life’s changes and uncertainty (Smith, 2015). Narratives implicitly convey meaning and values, create a context with descriptions of time and place, and assign attributes to the people and places involved (Kyle & Chick, 2004; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

Sheller and Urry (2006) suggest methods for mobilities research and a range of research practices can be invaluable for the investigation of experiences and feelings of movement and mobility (see Merriman, 2014). Furthermore, small-scale, exploratory and inductive research that examines individuals feelings and emotions is best captured through a variety of data collection techniques. Therefore, this study applies a variety of methods to capture the narrative of the return travel experience for multiple generations of migrants from Cyprus. A mixed methods approach consisting of informal interviews, journals, photo diaries, and participant observation create a subjective and reflexive lens with which to interpret the emotional experiences of family return travel. Participants are multi-generational members of one migrant family from Cyprus migrating to Canada in 1972. The study focuses specifically on the following family members: *Yia Yia* (37 at time of migration, mother who migrated, now 80); *Maria* (8 at time of migration, now 50); *Christos* (4 at time of migration, now 46); *Theo* (first generation Canadian, now 8); *Nia* (first generation Canadian, now 4). Names have been changed to protect anonymity. Interviews with children as well as other family members were performed only by the author, were individual, informal, occurring on the move and immediately following a particular event, visit, or activity. Interviews on the move lasted no longer than fifteen minutes whereas those in situ (in comfortable locations such as the interviewees' home in Canada and the home in Cyprus) were less than 30 minutes. Pre-trip interviews consisted of questions pertaining to return trip characteristics, motivations, and perceptions on identity and belonging. Informal interviews, photo diaries and journal writing during the return trip take place while active in various experiences from visiting monasteries, national historic monuments, and church, coffee shops, visiting family, and just being in the family home. Post-trip interviews revisit memories of place and perceptions on identity and belonging.

## Results and Discussion

This research captures the narratives of a return travel experience to the country of origin (Cyprus) of a multi-generational family from Canada. Family traveler stories emerge more easily through a variety of methods that capture experiences in situ and on the move.

The most important reason to return to Cyprus for original migrants is to visit with family members living in Cyprus. It is also an opportunity to visit with family that have migrated elsewhere, specifically London, England as they too return to Cyprus. Maria, who first migrated to Canada when she was eight, feels it is important to return to see family and feels that it is equally as important to bring family members with her, whether she is traveling with her mother or her sister and nephews (first generation Canadians). *Yia Yia*, who migrated when she was 37 and is now 80, definitely feels family is the number one reason she returns to Cyprus but that seeing the house (her matrimonial home where she raised her own children) and the village is also important. *Yia Yia* thinks that it is very important to have the new generations there, to have her own close family with her. She likes to share the experience of being home in Cyprus. Family travel 'back home' conjures up notions of *place-sharing*; being in the place of the homeland but also sharing this with return migrants from England, Canada and the new generation (e.g. Lewicka, 2008; Mair, 2009). The mobility paradigm rejects 'society as static' (Sheller & Urry, 2006) thus the flow of migrants as tourists from various migrant regions and of different generations back 'home' again demonstrates a complexity with the idea of 'being' and especially 'becoming' through the tourist practices of migrants (Coles & Timothy, 2004; Vathi, 2015).

While the migrant children found maintaining a Cypriot identity important to a degree, this varies depending on how old the children were when they migrated and how closely attached they are to their own identity or to the wider Cypriot community as well as the Greek Orthodox Church. For instance, Maria stated that she feels both Cypriot and Canadian and could not identify as one or the other. Christos, who migrated to Canada when he was 4, feels he is both Cypriot and Canadian, but his every day activities make him more Canadian and do not necessarily tie him with his Cypriot identity (except when he takes his children to Greek school once a week or attends church). However, when people

ask him 'where is he from?' He replies, 'Cyprus'. When Yia Yia was asked whether she identifies with being Cypriot, Canadian or both, she states with a broad smile without any hesitation, *Cypriot*; much more loudly than her other responses. Theo says he is Canadian and Cypriot. But it is not until Theo returns to Cyprus that he realizes how connected he is to a wider cultural and familial community. Theo is more cognizant of his Cypriot identity now that this is his second return trip to Cyprus. He recognizes family members, understands when they speak Greek and can speak some Greek in return. Nia says she is from Canada but does not yet have a concept of 'being Canadian.' However, while in Cyprus Nia looks around the table at an everyday family meal at a relative's house. She says aloud, *this is a big family*. Christos replies, *this is your family*. She frowns perplexed saying quietly, *but I prefer my family of four*. Later the following week at another large family meal, Nia says loudly with confidence looking around the table, *this is my family*. In her first family return trip, Nia realizes her family is in two places. Theo after two trips has already developed an understanding of two places and the emotional connections in both. These seemingly small interactions yet significant realizations justify why migrants view return travel as important especially for children and first generation Canadians; it further grounds a sense of place for their country of origin. By returning as often as they can migrants reaffirm this sense of place. Migrants have a double sense of belonging (to their home and host country) and while this is often interpreted by scholars as having a hybrid identity (Glick Schiller, Basch & Blanc, 1995; Louie, 2000), it is more conflicted than – and not necessarily as dynamic -- as the travel mobilities themselves. In Cyprus, Christos is asked how he feels being back 'home'? He replies, *When I am in Canada, I put being Cypriot on hold. When I come here, it's off of hold. I can speak Greek, I can go to the grocery store, go for walks, sit and talk and socialize. It's a microcosm of cousins. I come here, I am already a part of it. . There are split feelings about whether you should have left or stayed and they want to know how you turned out.*

Family travel back 'home' has deeper meanings, connections and impacts for migrants and first generation Canadians than other forms of travel. Activities centre on seeing family, visiting important heritage and religious sites (and taking older family members there with you), and being present when family and friends stop by to spend time with you. Everyday family dinners consisted of four generations ranging from 84 years to seven weeks old. Mundane experiences, as in sitting around chatting with multiple familial generations, attending church, eating traditional Cypriot meals, stopping by elder family members' homes, are deeply meaningful on a variety of levels for different generations both in Cyprus and beyond. In particular, it is difficult for Christos and Yia Yia to see their relatives getting older and having health issues. Returning brings not only pleasant memories at seeing family again but also the realization that migrants must leave not knowing for certain when they will return. Many migrants are far away when specific events take place whether it is the planning and events leading up to a wedding, when someone gets ill, or when there is a death of a family member or friend. This makes the family travel experience 'back home' increasingly emotional not just the returning but the leaving. This is a dynamic not often discussed in mobilities research. While the act of travel and mobility is relatively easy and the flow of ideas, messages, culture, and traditions for migrants much less constrained, the emotions involved are still just as static, stagnant and lingering.

Other aspects of family travel that conjure up emotions is the visiting of religious sites such as monasteries. Dressed in appropriately respectful clothing we had driven a fair distance to visit the monastery of the saint with which Theo was named after. Because Theo was named after his great uncle, it was also a very important trip for Christos and Yia Yia. The experience was further signified by the serenity of the site, religious rituals such as performing the cross, kissing saints' icons, lighting candles and witnessing the ceremonial burial icons of the monastery's monk. While the visiting of a monastery, in general, may not seem as important for an eight year old, it was described with as much eloquence and excitement both in interviews and in his journal as a recent trip to the Fasouri Waterpark located outside of Limassol. For others, a monastery visit is by all means important but for Yia Yia, Christos and Theo it became a binding familial memory and an emotional experience in a particularly significant place that will likely never be forgotten. While religious and pilgrimage sites are an important component of a family travel experience (Blackwell, 2007; Cohen, 2006; Timothy & Olsen, 2006), it

becomes especially important to understand these relationships when it is to a site located in the country of origin and performed by multiple generations of migrants.

## Conclusion

Using a framework of emotional geographies, this study investigates tourism, migration and the mobilities paradigm in addressing ever-increasingly complex conceptualizations of identity, place and belonging of return migrants as tourists. Multi-generational family travel itself exposes emotions relating both to familial dynamics and relationships as well as to the travel experiences themselves (see Schanzel, Yeoman & Backer, 2012). However in migrant family travel back 'home', emotions become even more exposed because family members have already established deep-seated feelings and attachments to the places being visited. Through the investigation of this migrant family during trip interviews and experiences both in situ and on the move, deeper conceptualizations of place, identity and belonging emerge. The exploratory nature of this study examines one family travel experience of varying generations of migrants to the country of origin and may not explain other generational family travel back 'home'. However, the application of a variety of methods through a mobilities paradigm allows deeper themes to emerge and acknowledges the meanings and emotional geographies of family travel for individuals with complex associations with place. As senses of place and identity become further challenged through increases (and decreases) in mobility, it becomes more important than ever to expand these realizations to other family travel experiences 'home'.

The notion of mobility in family travel to the country of origin needs to be opened up to reveal that it is not just movement of people, culture, ideas and information but of feelings and of emotional experiences of place(s). Emotions, feelings and senses of place are carried with these multi-generational family travelers, stay firmly planted within them – perhaps immobile -- but are once again revealed when they return. Only with an open, global and progressive idea of these migrant places are we able to observe the various crosscutting social networks in which transmigrants are involved in these places (Gieles, 2009). Gieles (2009) argues using the writings of Casey (1993, 1997) that we need to move away from a conception of place as an in/out and here/there binaries towards an understanding of place (and tourism places) as a continuum. The emotional and conflicted experiences of this multi-generational migrant family demonstrate this. We must therefore regard return migrants as continuously moving along the 'continuum of place', as always being in-between (people in various) places (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002). The travel stories of return migrants 'home' offer insight for a critical discussion of understanding the 'tourist', both for academics and practitioners alike. The emotional geographies of return migrants as tourists and new conceptualizations of mobilities are becoming increasingly important foci for unveiling the intangible and vibrant qualities of everyday meaning-full places.

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