COMING HOME?

Refugees, Migrants, and Those Who Stayed Behind

Edited by **Lynellyn D. Long and Ellen Oxfeld**

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Coming Home?

In memory of Beatrice Hackett for her work and scholarship on return

Contents

Introduction: An Ethnography of Return

Ellen Oxfeld and Lynellyn D. Long

> Someday, when my daughter has grown enough to understand and remember, we will take a trip to Russia. We will go to my village, where nobody lives anymore, where empty windows are nailed down. We will find my house, and I will show her a real Russian stove, with hundreds of tiny fingerprints on it. We will find our *banya* on the bank of the river. We will clean this now cold little hut and sit there for a long time, inhaling the smell of old birch leaves. With the beginning of twilight we will take off our clothes and swim under the moon in the river of my childhood. A flock of birds will timidly take wing from our loud squealing. They will circle above, surprised by the sound of human joy, so long forgotten in this abandoned, neglected place.
>
> —A thirty-eight-year-old Russian, Burlington, Vermont, 1999

People often remember a place from their past to which they want to return and share with future generations. However, for some, returning home is problematic and, given existing social, economic and political conditions, the return may be neither possible nor desirable. Historically, many immigrants, refugees, and exiles have been unable to return home.[1] Yet, surprisingly in recent times, many people find they can return home again and they are doing so—to visit, to live temporarily, or to reestablish a long-term residence.

In the past decade alone, the world witnessed the unprecedented return of millions of displaced persons, refugees, and migrants to their former homes.[2] According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), beginning in the 1990s and continuing to the present time, there was a steady rise in the number of refugee returns. In 1998 alone, UNHCR estimated that 3.5 million out of 22.5 million refugees and internally displaced persons returned to their homelands. Most recently, there have been major return movements in the Balkans, East Timor, Rwanda, and Guatemala. In 2000, between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, for example, cross border returns of different ethnic

minority groups outnumbered the previous five years, although the potential for a renewed outbreak of hostilities in Bosnia-Herzegovina remained high.

Voluntary mass repatriations are only part of the story. Throughout the world, immigrants and refugees are choosing to go home again and expending their own resources to re-establish themselves in a former home even after having left many years earlier. Irish immigrants from Boston are returning home to raise families in Northern Ireland (Mooney 1997; Barry 1997), Koreans from Los Angeles returned to South Korea after civil riots targeted their businesses (Kang 1997), and Puerto Ricans from the United States mainland retire to the island after years of work away. A quiet, steady stream of refugees and migrants are returning of their own accord to Vietnam, China, the Philippines, Barbados, Ireland, the Balkans, and many other countries. Contrary to widespread perceptions that people want to settle in their new homes, especially in wealthy Western countries, many refugees and migrants want to return eventually, and they lead their lives in the new home always hoping and/or planning for that eventuality. For example, of the 30 million people admitted to the United States between 1900 and 1980, some 10 million (one-third) returned home again (Stalker 2001: 114). Despite common experiences of uprooting, dislocation, and mobility in part characteristic of globalization, the idea of being rooted still has its own appeal. Indeed, at present, those who live outside the country of their birth comprise only 3 percent of the world's population (Stalker 2001: 11).

In this volume, we address return movements and how they affect both the communities to which people return, as well as the returnees themselves. Despite ample evidence of returns worldwide, quantifying return has always been problematic.[3] Circular migrations, the inability of governments to get precise data, and the many ways in which humans migrate make it impossible to assemble a completely accurate picture. Nonetheless, both contemporary and historical dimensions of this phenomenon have been assessed through a variety of techniques. These include the use of census data, surveys, immigration records, biographies and life histories, city directories, church registries, retrospective interviews, and estimates based on monetary remittances and return savings (Sills 2000/2001). For instance, from government, shipping, business, religious, and labor records, as well as the accounts of journalists and travelers, the historian Wyman has estimated that in the late 1800s and early 1900s a quarter to a third of all immigrants returned from the U.S. to resettle again in Europe permanently, totalling as many as four million returnees (Wyman 1993: 6). And, from a combination of Census and Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) data, Brjas and Bratsberg estimated that 21.5 percent of all legal immigrants who arrived in the United States between 1970 and 1974 had left by 1980 (1996: 169).[4] Presumably, most of these immigrants returned home. More recently, from interview and survey data, Reyes (1997) found that 50 percent of immigrants surveyed in 7,500 households in Mexico and the U.S. returned to Mexico within two years (cited in Sills 2000/2001: 5).

These studies demonstrate that return is an integral part of the migration ex-

perience. With increased flexibility in the flow of capital and trade goods, which may undermine the local subsistence base, migration has assumed increasing importance as an economic and social strategy for families. But, often returns make further migration possible, since the returnees provide knowledge of and networks in the host country (Massey 1987: 1399).

Numbers alone do not justify the critical importance of returns to contemporary issues of globalization, national and ethnic identities, human rights, and transnationalism. Returns have important political, social, economic and cultural consequences. For governments and local communities alike, returns of ethnic minorities to war torn societies or of diaspora groups to long awaited homelands have significant political consequences (Koser 2000)[5] leading to new balances of power and political arrangements. Returnees may also strain existing resources and relationships within local communities. Often returning migrants engage in building new houses and conspicuous consumption (Gmelch 1980). Although these activities may stimulate growth in the construction trade, such returns do not necessarily lead to new economic growth, investment, or innovation as is often argued by government authorities (in both sending and receiving countries) to justify the rapid return of refugees.

Nonetheless, return of certain professional groups appropriately timed may have positive economic effects on redeveloping poor and/or war-torn economies (Koser 2000; Gmelch 1980 and this volume; International Organization for Migration 2001). Many governments and even local communities encourage returns—especially with accompanying remittances, investment, and certain categories of skilled labor—to stimulate economic growth as a means to counter dependency on foreign capital and humanitarian assistance. In response to terrorist threats, many Western governments are also evicting immigrants (especially young labor migrants from the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia). Yet, many of these immigrants are leading productive lives in their host communities and filling key positions in the construction, information, and service sectors.

The contemporary phenomena of returns are not immune to the underlying processes and pressures of globalization. The compression of time and space, as well as an increasing velocity of global capital flows affect local economies and propel new labor movements (Harvey 1990). Ties to home and host often co-exist (Basch 1994). Transnational networks become important survival strategies and create identities that transcend national borders and boundaries (Brettel 2000; Ong 1993; Oxfeld 1993).

However, return as an analytic category differs from notions such as globalization and transnationalism, which are universal categories. Return, in contrast, is situated in particular events and experiences. While responding to larger universal processes, returns reflect particular historical, social, and personal contexts. Specifically, the concept of return allows us to analyze these larger processes in terms of people's own systems of meaning and experiences and to discern the particular human consequences of these larger forces in everyday lives and actions. Return is a category that people themselves use, embellish, and understand.

Return is also an important analytic category because each return has important political, social, economic and cultural consequences—not only for those who return but also for the sending and receiving communities. As others (Gmelch 1980; Brettel 2000; Ong 1993) who have analyzed returns observe, diaspora communities continue their cultural, physical, and economic ties to an ancestral or current homeland and such ties become part of return processes.

Of particular relevance to this analysis is exactly what connects or reconnects people to their earlier communities as they contemplate a possible or actual return. Also important are the conditions necessary for people to decide to return voluntarily (or to accept an assisted return), and when and on what basis they then decide to return. A fuller analysis also considers what happens to people in the sending and receiving communities afterward, whether the return is only for temporary periods or permanent. Finally, there are the effects on processes of globalization and transnational identities. Returns are a growing worldwide phenomenon that transform not only particular communities, but also global ways of relating and interacting with one another.

Defining Return

The contributors to this volume provide a series of ethnographic case studies to develop a comparative analysis of return. Return ranges temporally from short visits to permanent repatriation, spatially from one's original place of origin to a reconstructed homeland (a particular site in the home country where one has never actually lived), and legally from voluntary to coerced movements. This definition of return also includes the processes leading to returns. As such, return encompasses but is broader than return migration, which does not always include temporary visits or the preparations for return.

Some returns described in this volume take place after only a few years of exile, others after several decades. Several authors portray the experiences of refugees who earlier fled war and violence, others address the returns of labor migrants, who left primarily for economic reasons. The geographic locales include Ethiopia, Eritrea, Rwanda, Nicaragua, Barbados, the Balkans, Germany, China, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Many scholars limit their analyses of return to the initial act of return (see for example, Bovenkerk 1974: 5), yet return may also be a habitual, circular, or periodic movement, as in the case of Filipina guest workers in Hong Kong. Likewise, some Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese) re-open businesses in Vietnam but maintain economic ties and homes in the West.

The authors confine the analysis of return to those people who are actually returning or contemplating a return to a physical place of residence. Virtual returns, connections facilitated by computer networks and other types of media (referred to by Appadurai as "mediascapes" [1996: 33]), for example, warrant separate analysis. Focusing on those uprooted within their own lifetimes also excludes consideration of the eschatological return of Jews to Israel, a homeland

where they have never lived before, or of African Americans to ancestral lands. While these ancestral and historical returns are important phenomena, they differ quite profoundly from the experience of returning to a place where one once lived or to another physical setting in one's homeland. Such returns raise concerns about the continuity of ethnic identities and boundaries across generations that are worthy of attention in their own right.

The notion of homeland (as part of the analysis of return) does not imply that going home is necessarily desirable or natural. Suggesting that culture is rooted in particular geographic places would imply that uprooted refugees or migrants somehow lose their culture (Malkki 1997). People do not necessarily return to the same specific locale from which they left, and even if they do, that place may be so profoundly changed that its physical, spatial, and geographic attributes have little relevance. Thus, this analysis does not naturalize homelands in the discussions of return. Nevertheless, national boundaries and the role of states in constructing homelands are critical to understanding return, and the cases in this volume all involve return across national boundaries, though we recognize that such boundaries are themselves contingent and historically defined.

These case studies also explicitly address the cultural ambiguities and complexities of returning without assuming immutable ethnic identities or boundaries. Several authors examine the changing, transnational networks and identities resulting from interactions between those who return and those who stay behind. Potential returnees may simultaneously identify with and be estranged from former homelands. Home may eventually come to mean the new abode (Hackett 1997), or returnees may feel like outsiders in both places (see Long, this volume; Turki 1994). In addition, the distinction between returnees and those left behind often masks underlying historical, gender, class, and ethnic affinities or differences (see McSpadden and Phillips, this volume).

Return in the Literature

Diaspora literature is an excellent starting point for analyzing different experiences of return. Those who write about diaspora commonly agree that homeland plays a central role in diaspora consciousness (Cohen 1997). Even if the homeland exists only in memory, the idea of return is critical for many dispersed communities (Safron 1991), and it extends beyond those who personally remember the home country. A homeland has meaning even when people are ambivalent about it rather than identifying with a particular place (Clifford 1994: 305), or when the diaspora in question, such as the Afro-Caribbean, does not have a single center (Clifford 1994).

Migration literature, in contrast to diaspora literature, is less focused on ideologies of home. Migration literature traditionally depicts different kinds of spatial movements involved in returning. Migrants engage in circular or repeat migration patterns while maintaining ties in both sending and receiving countries (Skeldon

1997). Refugees and migrants may be compelled to return either within their home area or to another area within their country of origin (Koser 2000; King 1986, cited in Sills 2000/2001). Thus, refugee and migration studies often consider the push and pull factors and degree of volition that force or compel migrants and refugees to return, and they divide returns by cause into forced, planned, and spontaneous movements (Koser 2000; Long 2000). In most analyses of return, migration specialists go beyond geographical typologies to consider temporal criteria such as occasional, periodic, seasonal, temporary, or permanent returns (Koser 2000).

Many studies address the effects of return on both receiving and sending communities, and how returns may strengthen or weaken existing ties and relationships (Gmelch 1980, 1992; King 1986 cited in Sills 2000/2001; Watson 1977, Ong 1999). The roles of family, kinship ties, and property are often noted in the kinds and timing of various returns (King 1986; Massey 1987; Dustman 2001). Returns reflect transnational connections and identities and "the fluidity with which ideas, objects, capital and people move across borders and boundaries" (Basch etal, 1994: 27). Some ethnic groups adopt flexible citizenship strategies and maintain ties and relationships across transnational borders and boundaries (Ong 1993; Oxfeld 1993).

Transnational movements and repeat or circular migrations reinforce cultural hybridity (see Appaduri 1990, 1996; Trinh 1991; Ong 1993; White 1997). Not surprisingly, people negotiate the multiple spaces and movements by forming complex and at times, seemingly contradictory identities. How people negotiate this ambiguity across space and time is extensively explored in numerous fictional accounts (Narayan 1967; Ghosh 1988; Mukherjee 1989; Kingston 1989; Jen 1991), as well as in memoirs that speak specifically to the dilemmas of exile (Said 1987, 1994, 1999; Alvarez 1992; Ahmed 1999; and Rushdie 1991).

The authors in this volume analyze return first and foremost as a situated concept. A particular return necessarily receives its meaning from the returning individuals' experiences and points of view. Various accounts of return in the migration, refugee, diaspora, and exile literatures depict one or more overlapping or consecutive series of experiences. These involve both the processes and consequences of return across time and space and reflect various transnational ties, identities, concepts of homeland, and degrees of volition on the part of returnees. From these accounts, the authors consider returns (not just the physical act of transport but also the process over time) as *imagined, provisional,* and *repatriated.* These three aspects of the return experience need not be exclusive or sequential but permit comparative analyses, for example, of the return experiences of different economic groups. Many exiles can only imagine the possibility of return; others first imagine and later are able to return. Likewise, while a return may initially consist of a temporary (provisional) visit, it may later become permanent.[7] Yet a provisional return may also illuminate the reasons why permanent return is impossible or undesirable. Furthermore, returns have their own histories. Often the act of returning engenders other consequences that affect subsequent returns.

The sections that follow address the categories of experience that organize the accounts in this volume.

Imagined Return

Most people imagine returning first. They anticipate, plan, long for, and/or fear the return, but the physical act itself remains a future possibility. Thus, returning is imagined before deemed feasible or unlikely. Many people spend their whole lives imagining the return but are never able or willing to enact it. Nonetheless, the possibility frames how they relate to their countries of origin and settlement. For instance, refugees from the former Yugoslavia contemplate returning (Huseby-Darvas 1997), but ethnically mixed marriages may also endanger them in an environment marked by continuing conflict and an emphasis on ethnic purity. Many refugees simply are not allowed to return, or to return with the intention of settling down, by the current political regime in their homelands.

Imagining return is often an emotionally charged experience, becoming more so as it is imminent. In order to return, people analyze the potential consequences (such as the degree of danger, financial viability, and reception) and confront strong emotions. For example, a Croatian refugee imprisoned in a Serbian prisoner of war camp insisted that he wanted to return home (Povzranovic 1998). However, once he realized that he could actually do so, he started losing consciousness and sleeping hours at a time.

In imagining one's return, the returnee will not necessarily romanticize the past but often pragmatically explores various options and likely outcomes of different decisions. Refugees from Eritrea who want to participate in the building of a new homeland weigh this desire against political insecurity and limited educational and career options, especially for women (see McSpadden, this volume). The material expectations of receiving communities often initially discourage some people (particularly those without the means) from returning (Oxfeld, MacSpadden, Gmelch, and Constable, this volume). People may wish to wait until they have the financial means to lavish gifts on their home communities. Both sides may seek to maintain face and justify the time away with reference to appropriate remittances, for the returnee's change in material status redounds to the home community.

Sometimes the return may be dangerous and people imagining the return weigh the risks. Bugingo, a Rwandan refugee, faced extreme danger and potential imprisonment in returning (Janzen, this volume). Although not directly implicated in the genocide, he knew that he could be arrested or killed upon return. Ultimately, he weighed his fears of returning against the deprivations of remaining indefinitely in the Congolese refugee camps. Similarly, displaced and impoverished Nicaraguan peasants (Phillips, this volume) find life harsh in the Honduran refugee camps, where they are separated from their economic livelihood, farming, and supportive local social ties.

Historical, social, and personal memories provide critical material for imagining a future return. Exiles may need to construct new narratives about their

earlier lives in order to return. Local and international authorities expected ethnic Croats, Hungarians, and Slovenes to return and live peacefully again amongst Serbian neighbors who supported the aggression in their villages (see Povzranovic 1998; Long, personal observation 2001). To overcome a resistance among Croatian minorities to return to Eastern Slavonia, international and local authorities developed a new folkloric festival tradition, advocating an alternate, idealized history of the region.

While memories of trauma and horror must be effaced, confronted, or overcome, such intense experiences also compel returns years later. The Pomeranians who fled the eastern parts of Germany in the wake of the advancing Soviet army at the end of World War II, initially felt profoundly uprooted (Hackett 1997). To deal with the loss, they romanticized versions of home and formed organizations devoted to remembering.

The imagined return may influence whether and under what circumstances an eventual return occurs. Hutu camp and town refugees in Tanzania, for example, constructed very different images and trajectories of return (Malkki 1995a). Town refugees analyzed the political changes of the regime in Burundi that would make their return possible. They assessed the practical implications, such as the economic security of their families. Camp refugees, on the other hand, linked return to a political movement of "reclaiming the nation" and considered their residence in Tanzania as a temporary stage preceding a millenialist return (Malkki 1995a: 193), a return that could only remain imaginary.

Those imagining a return may use photographs and other objects to memorialize the past and to develop symbolic architecture for a future return. Filipinas in Hong Kong provide an idealized photographic presentation of their life in preparation for a triumphal return at some later date (Margold, this volume). Instead of being saved for the future, photographs may also replace an actual return (Slyomovics 1998). Some Palestinians journey to Israel to find their previous homes. Others, deterred by imagining the painfulness of seeing their houses occupied by others and the finality of dispossession, stay behind. Instead, "friends acting as surrogates may travel to the villages in order to photograph them for those unable or unwilling to make the journey" (Slyomovics 1998: 16).

Gender considerations play a role in the imagined returns of Filipina maids in Hong Kong. Familial obligations provide equally compelling cases for staying in Hong Kong and earning more money or returning home to spouses and children. Tensions back home and the relative freedom of life away from daily familial scrutiny may also cause women to delay their return and to sign on for another multi-year contract (Constable, this volume). Women in particular often appreciate the expanded educational, social, and employment opportunities and freedom to redefine their social roles in the new place and may be very ambivalent about returning to former roles (as shown in MacSpadden's study of Eritrians). However, continuing to imagine a possible return makes the decision to stay socially acceptable.

The home communities (those who remained behind) also imagine the return. For these local communities, imagined homecomings may be initially used to confirm the local community members' own decisions not to leave and their maintenance of a particular way of life. They may view their communities as ancestral centers and expect returnees to celebrate their return by throwing banquets, giving gifts, and making ancestral offerings (for example, when overseas Vietnamese or Chinese return).

Provisional Return

The act of imagining a return is integrally related to the possibility and circumstances of an actual return. While many refugees and displaced are forced to repatriate permanently, there are numerous examples of voluntary, provisional returns.

People provisionally return to their previous homes to visit relatives, invest in businesses, donate philanthropically, celebrate rituals and festivals, or make religious pilgrimages. Nicaraguans from the new global business class (in contrast to rural peasants who must permanently repatriate) have the option of returning for a part of every year, while retaining residence outside Nicaragua for the remaining part (Phillips, this volume). Others may return provisionally as part of a pattern of seasonal migration. Emigres who do not return, but who vote in local elections (Verdery 1998) are returning in one aspect as well. Such returns are initially acts of political participation but may eventually lead to permanent repatriation.

As such, provisional returns give people a chance to decide if they want to return on a long-term basis. For instance, during the years of 1999 through January 2002, 4,684 voluntary repatriations occurred between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. But during the same period almost double that many individuals participated in "Go and See Visits." These were organized by international agencies to help people decide whether they wanted to repatriate permanently.[8]

Provisional returns to homelands also may be understood as modern day pilgrimages to affirm or redefine religious and other cultural traditions, and to counter the universalizing influences of the global economy. Yet such provisional returns, by strengthening transnational identities, also reflect the very forces they oppose in their own mobility and flexibility. Before or following a provisional return, people may apply for permanent citizenship and a passport in their host or asylum country. This has been common among Hong Kong Chinese returning from Canada (*Migration Dialogue*, February 1995, cited by Sills 2000/2001), and among some Bosnians returning to Sarajevo (Steffansson, this volume).

These returns are also used to overcome the initial fears and hesitations surrounding the act of leaving in the first place. In recent years, for instance, many Israeli Jews have returned to the lands of their birth. Partly pilgrimage, partly tourism, Moroccan Israelis on one such trip were critical of the Jews who re-

mained behind and relived the feelings of insecurity that lead them to emigrate (Levy 1997). Finding their birthplace altered, they constructed a new narrative about the past.

A provisional return visit may emphasize the impossibility or undesirability of permanent return. Recent Palestinian accounts of returning to Israel (before the current *intifada*) accentuate many refugees' dispossession and are necessarily provisional (see Slyomovics 1998: 14). Israelis tell of Palestinians suddenly appearing on their doorsteps, looking around, asking questions, and disappearing (Rubinstein 1991). For the Arab returnees, this is no "homecoming" but a grotesque distortion (Rubinstein 1991: 62). Likewise, Edward Said recounts how in returning to his birthplace, Jerusalem, he confronted the difficult reality of Israel's existence and the dismemberment of neighborhoods he once knew. "I found myself repeating to myself that I did have a right to be here, that I was a native," he observes (Said 1994: 177).

Several memoirs of intellectuals moving between post-colonial societies and North America or Western Europe contain references to return (Ondaatje 1982; Mukherjee and Blaise 1995). In these encounters, the return visit often prompts a reevaluation or even confrontation with past cultural practices and traditions (see Turki 1994). Contemporary Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese) returning to work in Saigon or Hanoi report how they see coming back as a way of confronting past memories, becoming reconciled with their parents' silences and reconnecting (especially at Tet) with ancestral rites and traditions (Long, this volume).

As the act of returning unfolds, the specific experiences often contrast with the returnee's original dreams. Barbadian returning parents report difficult reunions with children who do not recognize them. A society that initially seems beautiful and relaxed gradually appears narrow and old-fashioned. Further, returnees face jealousy and complex social expectations. As one returnee observes, "If you come back with money, they are jealous. If you come back with nothing, they ridicule you." (Gmelch, this volume). Given these difficulties, some returnees travel back and forth and/or return only during certain periods. Even though Pomeranians from Eastern Germany initially expected to return permanently they contrasted their former homes in the East with their comfortable and settled existence in the West. By provisionally returning, they could accept their new lives in the West and view their former homeland as a place for occasional vacation visits. One Pomeranian observed, "What we [once] looked down upon in East Germany as old-fashioned—is now being touted by tour businesses as nostalgic—see Germany as it used to be!" (Hackett 1997)

A provisional return often confirms the home community's expectations. When people eventually return home, they may carry with them photographs and other memorabilia to signify their success in the other culture (Margold, this volume). Chinese villagers in the home village assume their kin want to return to their ancestral lands (Oxfeld, this volume).[9] Likewise, the Vietnamese view the returning Viet Kieu as legitimating the current political, post-Doi Moi (renovation) transi-