

Afterword on *Return Migration in Later Life* in the wake of COVID-19

John Percival

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the significance of home as a refuge and, for some, as a place of entrapment. But what if home is your country of birth, from which you emigrated when young and to which, on reaching older age, you increasingly yearn to return? For this growing population of ageing migrants – the subject of our book: *Return Migration in Later Life: International Perspectives** – the prospect of finding refuge “back home” may now be even more challenging in the wake of this pandemic, as I have learned in recent communication with some erstwhile interviewees.

The intention to return home is common in many migrant traditions, and central to the great return narrative – Homer’s *Odyssey*. As with Odysseus, today’s returnees and prospective returnees face many challenges. Chief among these are the disparity between remembered home and changes over time; the emotionally conflicting ties to siblings, and possibly parents, “back home” and to children, and sometimes grandchildren, in the ‘host’ country; and the sometimes confusing information about pensions rights, services and advice in the country of origin. Such issues are likely to assume greater prominence in the future, given Shah’s (2020) contention that more people now live away from their countries of birth than at any other time in human history.

These challenges, like those confronting Odysseus, do not extinguish the homing instinct, irresistible to many ageing migrants. Attachment to place is, after all, part of the human condition, however troublesome that may be when the significant place is thousands of miles away and still, after many years, exerts a strong, almost magnetic, pull. Retirees who have been widowed, and whose children have well established lives in the host country, may now feel more free and determined to live out their later years where their lives began, returning to their roots to complete their life cycle. Indeed, as our book shows, a wish to die in the country of their birth can be a forceful motivating factor for prospective returnees.

This desire to be reconnected with country of origin may be strengthened during times of trauma or turmoil, such as a pandemic. However, the returnee’s children and grandchildren left behind in the

'host' country may doubt even more strongly the wisdom of such a move and seriously worry that COVID-19, or any future virus, would prevent them seeing or caring for their loved one when most needed. This appeared to be the case for one of my interviewees, Maisie Lawton, aged 82, who recently told me, via email, that her return to Scotland from Australia at the beginning of 2020 was quickly curtailed when her daughter in Australia insisted she return there because of the pandemic. While Maisie's plans to re-settle back home in Scotland are currently on hold, her determination has not been blunted, evident when she told me, "But I want to die in Scotland – up in the Shetlands. In October [all being well] I will go up to the Shetlands and make all the preparations for financing my cremation, preparing a will and the usual stuff".

The pandemic has also thwarted return plans of two other interviewees I have recently caught up with. Valerie Harris, aged 77, who emigrated to the USA as a young teacher and subsequently married an American, returned to her home country, Australia, when her husband died – a return she had always envisaged. She now visits her son and his family in Seattle whenever she can but the pandemic has, for the time being, prevented any firm plans for future contact. Brian Linton, aged 65, had planned to return to live in England in January 2018 but a month before the move from Australia his wife was diagnosed with Diabetes type 1, which prevented return at that time. Now that COVID-19 has struck, Brian and his wife have formulated a more cautious plan, to take effect when the pandemic has subsided or when there is a vaccine: to spend half the year in Australia and half in England. In taking this option, Brian and his wife will join other migrants with transnational identities, who live out "narratives of exile" (Conway and Potter, 2007:29).

As well as highlighting competing personal priorities and constraints faced by return migrants, such as those referred to above, COVID-19 has exposed frail national economies as well as income disparities in many countries, which may in fact see return migration increase (Munasinghe, 2020). Indeed, retirees now with weaker economic ties to the host country would perhaps be especially motivated to return to their country of origin if they see there the prospect of greater financial security. COVID-19 has also shone a light on stark differences between how well national health systems have coped with the pandemic. As a result, prospective returnees, especially those who emigrated for reasons connected with the host country's improved social infrastructure, may reluctantly chose to remain there to safeguard their health. On the

other hand, some may decide to risk such security if the emotional compulsion to return to country of origin proves more compelling.

These and other possible consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are given credence by the studies contained in our book, which documents the return migration experiences and deliberations of older people across the globe: from Chile to Sweden, India to England, the Caribbean and Australia to the USA, Estonia to Australia, Greece to Denmark, Italy and Spain to Switzerland, and England to Australia. The pandemic has accentuated the book's key themes, those of family reconnection; identity and belonging; memory and myth; and cultural inclusivity. COVID-19 has also sharply highlighted a major, strategic message put forward in the book: that local government agencies and organisations need to consider how best they provide prospective returnees with information and support on matters such as housing, pensions, social security provision and banking, as well as access to health and social care systems.

*Percival, J. (ed) (2013) *Return Migration in Later Life: International Perspectives*. Bristol: Policy Press.

References

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Interviewee names used in this article have been changed to protect confidentiality.

John Percival
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john.percival@uwe.ac.uk
percivaljohn8@gmail.com