

INTRODUCTION

Approaching Home

Immigration is in the news every day. Many of the reports underscore generalized fears of “illegal” movement or the appropriation of domestic jobs and cultural change. Politically and socially controversial, immigration is often positioned in the media in terms of negative statistics rather than individual realities. This ideologically constructed standpoint creates an oppositional atmosphere. It can then be easy to forget that an immigrant can be any kind of person, from any background. Immigrants are our neighbors and our coworkers. Through marriage and children, immigrants often become part of our extended families. Like many non-migrants, they struggle to build a future, find contentment, and create a fulfilling life for themselves and their families. Regardless of how or why immigrants make their journey, they too are searching for a safe place that they can call home.

Worldwide there are around 200 million international migrants. About three-quarters of these migrants move to places that have higher living standards than those of their country of origin (UNDP 2009, 22–23). In 2005, there were 37 million immigrants living in the United States alone (Portes and Rumbaut 2006, 12). Many individuals are drawn to countries where work as strawberry pickers, meat packers, or domestics waits for them. They accept low-paying jobs and often get little respect, remaining virtually invisible to much of the public. We do not see the person who neatly cuts up our beef and wraps it in plastic. We do not see the backbreaking efforts of farm workers who labor in the heat and mud; we see only the colorful fruits and vegetables attractively displayed in the produce sections of our grocery stores. We do not see the cleaning crew working in our offices at night, but we smell freshly sanitized bathrooms and walk on newly vacuumed carpets.

Others leave their homes to escape repression, torture, or war. Though some are also escaping poverty, there are many refugees who are educated and who held prestigious positions in their home countries. The fortunate may find professional employment in their fields; more often, though, they count themselves lucky to find work in factories or restaurants.

Though at first glance the meaning of home may seem like a purely emotional concept, it has far-reaching political consequences. Aviezer Tucker has described human beings as “a migratory species,” all of whom are searching for home (1994, 186). By assuming that a person’s land of birth, or ethnicity, defines his or her “home,” governments can use the word and the concept for their own purposes. Economic and political refugees are sent back “home,” to a place that they have often risked their lives to leave and that—depending on their age at the time of migration—they may not even remember. The rationale that home is a singular location where a person must inevitably belong is used to exclude people from communities and prevent them from crossing borders. Although state-defined and personal perceptions of identity can differ, government authorities have an interest in maintaining the myth of historically linear and stable identities (Tucker 1994, 186; Ong 1999, 2).

The high numbers of immigrants worldwide demand that they be understood in ways other than those that serve institutional purposes. Viewing foreigners as the “other” not only separates and marginalizes them but also distances other people from the rich contributions immigrants make to their communities. Fair policy decisions therefore require an understanding of how the issues of identity, home, and migration are intertwined. Though individual immigration stories are, by their nature, personal, they are also intrinsically political (Furman 2005, 94; Benmayor and Skotnes 1994, 15–16) and can be a valuable means of informing policy.

INSIDER PERSPECTIVES

I became keenly aware of the personal challenges that immigrants face after my sister moved to Norway in 1985 to live in her future husband’s hometown. Over the years, I have listened to the story of her immigrant experience and have seen how living as a foreigner has shaped her life and altered her sense of self and home. I once asked her if she realized when she left home that she would spend most of her adult life so far away from her roots. Her teasing response was “No, it was an accident.” She knew she was moving, of course, but that decision was peripheral to the decision to marry, not an explicit decision to confuse her notion of home. She did not anticipate that she would struggle with unremitting feelings of dislocation for the next twenty years or more.

By witnessing my sister’s life, I began to understand that the effect of immigration on individual lives is not short-lived. I discovered that feeling like a “foreigner” does not end when a person learns a new language,

establishes residency, buys a house, or even changes citizenship. Instead, foreignness lingers and, as the years go by, creates fluid emotions about belonging, home, and identity. Those who stay in an adopted country go through a continual process of adjustment to and learning about both their new country and themselves.

These observations prompted me to look more closely at the immigrant experience. I wanted to explore whether the circumstances that led a person to immigrate might affect his or her ability to find comfort and a sense of belonging in a new home, how living in a different culture might transform perceptions of identity, and what meanings the journey of immigration might have to someone looking back over twenty or thirty years of life in a foreign country. And if a new sense of home and place is established, how do personal connections to a former home fit into this new life?

We hear about economic immigrants and political refugees because of their numbers and visibility. But there is another category of immigrants rarely covered by the media, perhaps because their stories are less dramatic: borrowing my sister's language, I refer to them as "accidental immigrants." These immigrants neither migrate to new countries to escape poverty or repression nor follow a pattern of movement by their fellow nationals or ethnic groups. Instead, accidental immigrants make intentional life decisions—such as those that involve marriage, education, or career advancement—that lead to the secondary and sometimes unanticipated outcome of long-term immigration. While at times they struggle with their choices, they have the advantage of being able to decide whether to stay in their adopted countries.¹

The four women I feature in *Accidental Immigrants and the Search for Home* fall into this category. Though their circumstances can be differentiated from those of other migrants, they share the experience of having left home and the challenges and adjustments that come with living in a foreign country. The lives of the four accidental immigrants portrayed here provide insight into the lives of any immigrant from any setting: that they have had the opportunity to choose their home does not eliminate the compelling human need to belong and to feel at home.²

Anna Nielsen, born Ataahua Hakaraia, is Maori, from New Zealand. When she left home, she planned to return in a year; she never dreamed she would spend most of her life in Norway. Both Shirine Arya Cooper and Lisa Dwyre Nichols have experienced multiple immigrations but for different reasons: Lisa, born in Africa to working-class English parents, spent her childhood between Zambia and Canada and as a young woman immigrated to the United States to marry an American. Before marrying her husband, who is Jewish, Lisa converted from Christianity to Judaism, so conversion, too, is part of her cultural journey. Shirine, the daughter of an Iranian diplomat, spent her childhood moving between various countries before coming to the United States to study. She stayed in the United States for more than twenty years before finally moving to France. Originally

from Connecticut, Barrett Meyer flew to Caracas and knew immediately that she would never want to leave. In Venezuela she has worked as a musician, a teacher, and a television executive.³ All four women, who began their accidental immigrations in their twenties and are now in their forties or fifties, have lived their adult lives in adopted countries.

FINDING HOME THROUGH LIFE HISTORIES

While my sister provides me with an insider's perspective on immigration, our close relationship means also that her viewpoint influences mine. As a result, I tend to compare other immigrants' experiences to my sister's. Did they adapt to their new lives more or less easily than she did? Did they have the same experiences around children, work, and families abroad? As the point of reference from which I comprehend the stories that I have heard, my sister's life inevitably shapes my interpretations.

My own story also guides my research. Raised in the midwestern United States, I tend to find the themes of renewal and positive personal transformation in individual life narratives that are emblematic of my culture (see McAdams 2006). My focus also gravitates toward individual rather than group identity (see Appadurai 1996, 173). That I am an Anglo woman whose life has been relatively privileged undoubtedly affects my preconceptions and biases, even as I recognize them for what they are.

Having a close relative abroad profoundly altered my life in both positive and negative ways. In particular, my perspectives about belonging and home have become broader. Finding my own place to call home has been a lifelong endeavor; as I grow older, the need for grounding in a geographic location has become increasingly important. As a result, I am personally invested in researching the subject of home.

The portrayals I write, then, are a "joint production" (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008, 100) or "double biography," because my personality and biases necessarily flow through the narratives alongside those of the participants (Frank 1979, 89; Watson and Watson-Franke 1985, 12). The "truths" of the narratives are contingent on my interpretations, though I have made a conscious effort to refrain from imposing my own values as I retell and contextualize each story.⁴

To achieve an intimate understanding of the long-term effects of immigration, I explored the life stories of four immigrants from childhood through adulthood. I chose the participants for a variety of reasons: their similarity in age and in length of time as immigrants and their differences in terms of geographic location, ethnicity, personality, and perspective. As immigrants who have lived away from their first homes for many years, the participants were able to share the kind of insights that can come only from reflection—from a long-term view influenced by time and place. I was also drawn to them as my contemporaries, and therefore as women whose lives would be likely to resonate with my own.

The reasoning behind my decision to write about women was twofold: (1) the experiences of female immigrants would more closely resemble those of my sister, and (2) until recently women have been understudied in much immigration research (Brettell 2008, 128). Given that half the migrants (UNDP 2009, 25) and most of the refugees in the world are women (Croucher 2004, 163), it is vitally important that we understand how gender influences migration and, in turn, how migration influences the lives of women. Women, for example, tend to feel a greater need than men to belong in a new culture and tend to mourn the losses associated with immigration more than men do (Walsh and Horenczyk 2001). Men and women are also likely to differ in their responses to the meaning of home (Gurney 1997).⁵ Stories told by women, including cross-cultural insights into family life, marriage, and gender, are necessary to any discussion of globalization (see Ong 1995, 367; 1999, 11–12).

Although the participants have had varying cultural influences during their lives, which include differing concepts of self, identity, and home, they have all lived in and internalized Western cultures such that they understand home and belonging from a viewpoint comparable to my own. Specifically, their understanding of the emotionally based notion of home encompasses Western ideas of time, space, boundaries, safety, and grounding (see Jackson 1995). While the term “Western” is not intended to suggest homogeneity, the participants’ embedded understanding of the concepts of home and identity is similarly situated.

The purpose of the book is to gain insight into the interrelationship between immigration and individual perceptions of home. Life histories are particularly effective in the study of immigration, as they provide a retrospective, humanized view of the slow process of adjustment to life in a new place. While personal narratives cannot be generalized, they are a useful way to “get beneath the abstractions of migration theory in order to understand migration from an insider’s perspective” and can inform broader observations about migration (Gmelch 1992, 311; see also Benmayor and Skotnes 1994, 14–15). The exploration of home is also particularly well suited to narrative and life history. As the author Michael Jackson has noted, home is not an essence that can be easily defined. “Being-at-home-in-the-world” is best described as a “lived relationship” (Jackson 1995, 123).

Life histories are based on memories, and memory changes as it is colored by time and experience. Memories are not absolute truths; they become, instead, a reflection of the feelings that remain. The fact that subjective truths may not correspond precisely with other versions of an event does not lessen the validity or meaning of the story told. The process of recalling may itself bring about new realizations and change how an event is understood or perceived (Watson and Watson-Franke 1985, 2–3). Stories, then, are told “about and around a life” (Behar 1993, 235); they are intensely personal and present the truths as they appear to the participant, even as later events and community narratives influence them (Bell 2002,

208). How a person relates his or her life story is also influenced by culture and by the value the culture places on different interpretations of any one event (McAdams 2006, 288–289).

NARRATIVE JOURNEYS

The many external factors that merge to create a person's response to immigration are addressed here only as they relate to the four participants. For example, economic and political forces (such as the independence of Zambia, the Iranian revolution, ethnic marginalization in New Zealand, and economic growth and collapse in Venezuela) certainly influenced how the participants viewed their immigration experiences. Only if they, as actors, felt historical or political pressures to be relevant to their stories, however, are these forces, or such factors as gender roles and cultural differences, discussed here. As Anna told me, she can make no wide-ranging statements about Norwegian culture; she can describe only her own personal experiences with the people she met. Her story and those of the other participants are therefore not offered as in-depth studies of any culture. They are the stories of each woman's life in the country or countries where she encountered these cultures.

In this book I retell the stories that *the participants wanted to tell me* about their immigrant experiences. The details and events that I have included are part of the narrative that each person expressed as important to her in terms of belonging and identity. The stories the women related to me emphasized their experiences of home, family, and personal change. Their stories were not about facts and events alone; they were also about the emotions and the meaning that they attributed to these experiences. What the participants chose to say and how they chose to say it in our interviews reflect how they make sense of their past and find coherence in their lives (McAdams 2006, 83–84). Although some of their self-reflections may not seem directly relevant to immigration and home, I have included those that appeared to affect how the participants themselves understand their immigrant experiences.⁶

Recent research across a variety of disciplines addresses theories of immigration and home (Mallett 2004). Although this book is based mainly in anthropology, I draw on other disciplines, most notably psychology, to understand issues around belonging, home, and identity. Borrowing from the methodologies of narrative inquiry, I not only tell the stories but also contemplate the insights and meanings that the stories hold (Bell 2002, 208). References to scholarly literature help frame the investigation, but my focus remains on the narratives and the understanding of immigration and home that can be drawn from them. As themes are revealed in the narratives, I explore relevant theoretical concepts, but I seek to avoid allowing any individual theory to overshadow the perspectives of the storytellers themselves

(Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008, 10–11, 118). A full examination of any one particular theory is beyond the scope of this book.

By joining the rich details of the participants' lives with limited commentary and discussion, I hope to create a conversation between interpretation and story.⁷ Relating the life stories of these four women is meant to raise questions about how individuals fit within theoretical models.⁸ My hope is that the individual viewpoints of home that I present here can inform and ground theories that consider external political and social issues and the influence they have on immigrants.

In terms of genre, *Accidental Immigrants and the Search for Home*, like its participants, is a hybrid. The book, which strives to bridge the gap between scholarly works and those intended for general audiences, is located between conventional categories. Following the advice of Biddu Martin and Chandra Mohanty, I attempt “to avoid two traps, the purely experiential and the theoretical oversight of personal and collective histories” (1986, 210).

Anna, Lisa, Shirine, and Barrett came from and have moved to a variety of places. My knowledge of the cultures of these regions is limited. The descriptions and the references to place, religious practices, and languages are based on the memories and knowledge that the participants communicated to me and, in some cases (for example, Norway, Denver, and Miami), my own life experiences. Two of the women I had known for many years before the project began, and two I had the honor of befriending as our interviews unfolded. I know them and the details of their lives well. I see them as exceptional women not only because of their personal accomplishments but also because they have undertaken journeys full of risks and have faced those risks with courage and conviction. Although the experiences of these four women may differ from those of many readers, aspects of their lives will be familiar to all—including the joys and challenges of jobs and families, which they have worked their way through with as much grace as they can. I have made every effort to represent accurately the essence of each experience.



Finding language that accurately describes the layered and complex experience of immigration and that includes both the figurative and literal aspects of the journey has been a challenge. During the course of my research, I found myself on a journey of my own, which led me to a new way of thinking about the process of immigration. After completing the interviews, but before I began the writing process, I walked the Camino de Santiago, a historical pilgrimage route across northern Spain. With nothing but a basic guidebook and my backpack, I did not know what I might encounter, whom I might meet, or even where I might sleep at night. The experience deepened my perspective of life itself as a pilgrimage—a perpetual search for meaning as we walk our individual journeys.

After I returned to my writing, the metaphor of pilgrimage came to mind as I thought about how to describe the emotional lives of the participants. Though these women did not set out to embark on literal pilgrimages, I saw their experiences as mirroring key aspects of pilgrim journeys: they traveled to new locations, where they repeatedly faced the unknown, and their movement between places was about not only geographical change but also personal transition and transformation. In the process of adjusting to their new lives, they faced self-reflection. They were challenged to maintain a sense of trust and openness in the presence of fear or personal trials. They were uncertain what they might find but hopeful that their new surroundings would bring some measure of fulfillment and, eventually, a feeling of home and community.

The core of the book is the exploration of how, in the course of negotiating the demands of family and society, these four women found a way to balance the complexity of their lives, while also reconstructing their identities around the experience of immigration. Regardless of how immigration is perceived, it is a fact of contemporary life. I hope that these narratives illustrate the incredible diversity of experience among immigrants, as well as the life experiences that we all share, whether or not we ever leave home. The stories are not only portraits of individuals and how they find meaning but also evidence of how the lives of immigrants mirror the changes that we all experience through the forces of movement and globalization.

In today's world, no one is detached from the pervasiveness of global connections. Immigrants may dress or speak differently or have a distinct appearance; they may celebrate different holidays. But whether they are invisible, working behind the scenes in kitchens or in fields, or the people living next door whom we see mowing their lawns or dropping their children off at school, their stories demonstrate how resilient and brave ordinary people can be as they face the challenges of everyday life.