

Rita Chin comment on:

Anastasia Christou, “Narrating the Ethnography of Return: Interdisciplinary Contributions to Migration Research”

In her interesting paper, Christou asks us to consider a key topic that has received relatively little attention in the emerging field of migration studies: return migration. This phenomenon, she points out, is particularly crucial because it illuminates the relationship between identity (“who I am”) and place (“where I am”). Arguing for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of migration, she also asserts that these components of belonging must be seen as social constructions which are contingent on specific historical, social, political, and geographical contexts. She presents a portion of her research based on interviews with second-generation, Greek-American return migrants, emphasizing a “life history” approach that foregrounds their own voices. Christou’s paper raises a number of very important questions for scholars of migration, which I want to suggest can be roughly clustered around three narrative categories that emerge from her interviews—“home,” “identity” (or self), and “return.”

For anyone interested in the experience of migration, the concept of “home” is absolutely central. “Home” is the trope invoked to describe what is being left at the moment of emigration, what is missed or longed for in migration, and what is sought after through return migration. But precisely because of its ubiquity, it is worth thinking more carefully about this term. The meaning of “home” is never stable; its specific contours change over the cycle of migration. Similarly, groups rarely share the same conception of “home”; the ideas about “home” differ from person to person, and context to context. One way to get at the complexities of “home” is to think about the differences

between “where you hang your hat” (that is, the physical location where one works or happens to be) and “where your heart is” (that is, a place of emotional attachment). For a temporary migrant worker, this distinction may be relatively straightforward, but for a refugee, the current place of residence may provide more of a feeling of being “at home” even though it lacks the sentimental attachments of the homeland. It is important, then, to differentiate between being “home” and “at home,” and consider the ways in which these states relate to one another.

The question of identity is also a central concern for students of the social and cultural aspects of migration. If we proceed from an understanding of identities as perpetually in flux, in the process of being constructed, and determined by context, our task really lies in showing multiple, shifting identities in action—how they work and develop. One way to begin, as Christou suggests, is to look at the intersection of identity and place. In what way does a migrant’s sense of self and belonging change as s/he moves across borders? In what specific ways do those identities conform to or refuse traditional nation-state affiliations? And according to what logics or particular social/economic/political contexts can we explain these transformations?

Into this mix, Christou’s paper introduces the return phase as a significant but often overlooked aspect of migration. If return is a key component of the migration cycle, it is necessary to make some contextual distinctions. Migrant workers who leave home for a specific job often plan to come home after just a few years abroad. By contrast, immigrants who seek to make a better life for themselves generally leave their homelands with the intention of permanent relocation, but sometimes decide to come back after their children are grown and they have retired. The impetus for leaving often

affects the conditions of return, which not only include the length of time between migrations but also the process of readjustment to the homeland. In her discussion of return, Christou further alludes to the fact that the male and female partners of several married couples in her study initially had different attitudes about moving to Greece. This interesting tidbit seems worth exploring in order to trace the ways in which diasporic situations are gendered.

These three issues are even more complicated for the specific group that Christou explores. Second-generation immigrants who return to their ancestral homeland force us to rethink our definitions of “home,” “identity,” and “return.” Christou’s interviewees seem to associate “home” unequivocally with Greece, but I wonder how they make sense of their U.S. birthplace. Does the U.S. also constitute a “home” for the return migrants, and if so, how is it understood in relation to Greece? Christou’s subjects state that they “rediscover” their “true” identities upon their return to their parents’ homeland. This suggests a kind of completion, as if their identities in the U.S. had been incomplete or disjointed. In what specific ways do these return migrants experience a fragmenting or splitting of their “Greek” and “American” identities while they are in the U.S.? What happens to their “American” identities once they return to Greece? If these identifications do not correspond to nation-state affiliation or citizenship, how do they complicate our understanding of the relationship between being “home” and “at home”? As second-generation Greek-Americans, Christou’s return migrants underscore the different modalities of “return.” Given that her subjects primarily experienced Greece and Greek culture through short-term visits and interactions with family, return to this homeland appears to be an attempt to realize (make real) idealized experiences relayed by

their parents or an abstract notion of “culture, history, music, food, and archaeology.” If “going home” requires a reworking of established relationships (between self and community, men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children), it seems crucial to include more detailed information and descriptions of the return migrants themselves and the personal, social, and economic conditions that shape them.

Finally, I believe that Christou’s paper would benefit by attempting to integrate the theoretical discussion with the primary sources and interview evidence. As it stands now, the paper covers a number of contemporary debates in ethnographic methodology, but this section remains distinct from the core of the essay—the interviews that she conducts with second-generation return migrants. I would encourage Christou to think more carefully about where the methodological debates surface in her interview transcripts. This, in turn, would help the reader to see how her ethnographic research complicates and pushes forward the debates.