

The 'Return' of British-born Cypriots to Cyprus: A Narrative Ethnography

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Sussex Academic Press (Brighton/Chicago/Toronto, 2014), x + 205 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-84519-588-5 (hard back)

Janine Teerling's book is a contemporary ethnography of the life experiences of British-born Cypriots who choose to return to Cyprus. It is unique in that it explores an aspect of British Cypriot migration that has not hitherto been examined – that of second generation British Cypriots and their re-entry back, to what in diaspora or migration studies, is commonly termed the 'home country'. The study is an empirical contribution to the field because not only does it thoroughly investigate the motives behind British-born Cypriots' decision to return to the island; it also explores their lived experience of settlement in Cyprus and how this has shaped their understanding of concepts such as home, belonging and identity more generally.

Teerling's journey into the lives of the British-born return migrants to Cyprus, explores many of the assumptions commonly held in popular discourse about British Cypriots. One of the assumptions repeatedly raised by her research participants (second generation British Cypriots), was the 'traditional' upbringing they received within the closed confines of the British Cypriot community compared to the more 'modern' lifestyle experienced by their respective 'cousins' who grew up at the same time in Cyprus. While her empirical findings serve to provide substance and depth of understanding to beliefs about the British Cypriot community as being traditional in terms of their values and practices; the collection of narratives also acts to challenge notions of 'tradition' and 'modernity', and turn them on their head. A case in point can be found in the childhood memories of second generation British Cypriots, who by their own admission, were brought up with traditional values compared to their brethren back in the parental home. In exploring childhood memories of family visits to Cyprus, Teerling narrates how many British Cypriots had fond memories of these trips, highlighting the greater liberties granted to them in the relative 'safety' of Cyprus, compared to the restrictions imposed on their freedoms by their anxious parents when they were back in the UK. Conscious of the sharp difference in up-bringing between themselves and their Cypriot cousins, many second generation British Cypriots related how ironic it was that their cousins looked down on their UK counterparts as 'villagers'. In reflecting on these memories after having settled in Cyprus as adults, a common view presented by British Cypriots was that despite

their sheltered upbringing in Britain, the metropolis enabled them to benefit by becoming more open-minded and independent. This compared to local Cypriots, many of whom in the view of British-Cypriot returnees have limited horizons or remain economically dependent on parents, even as young adults. In the light of these reflections, Teerling shows how even seemingly straight forward terms such as 'modernity' and 'tradition' can be highly charged, have contested meanings, and can be interpreted differently, depending on whether the beholder is a local Cypriot, a member of the diasporic community in Britain or a British-Cypriot returnee.

A key question Teerling grapples with at length is the British-Cypriot community's motives for relocating to Cyprus. According to her findings, decisions to abandon the UK were dictated mainly by practical or pragmatic reasons, for example, job opportunities and life style choices such as bringing up a family in a safe environment, or escaping the rat race of Britain's cities. In the main, decision-making had little to do with the sort of essentialist views that expressed a desire to 'rediscover roots' or the 'authentic' home present in research findings of other second generation returnees, such as the British Caribbean community. Although Teerling's findings were not entirely surprising, what was interesting to discover were the experiences of adjustment, as well as the accommodation techniques that second generation returnees employed once they had actually settled in Cyprus. Accounts of adjusting were of course diverse. They varied from those who openly expressed their initial loneliness or disappointment with their Cypriot family's lack of welcome and attention; to those who claimed 'oozing relaxation' once they set foot in Cyprus compared to their hectic work life in the UK. Alternatively, some claimed to have felt more Cypriot in the UK, while others went as far as to state they felt foreign in both places.

But beyond the differing experiences of adjustment, participants described how they adopted a 'strategic' approach to how they chose to settle in Cyprus and 'fit in'. Rejecting the 'essentialist' up-bringing afforded to them by their own first generation parents, second generation returnees have reportedly embraced a 'plural form of belonging', picking and choosing elements of contemporary Cypriot society that best suit them. By consciously capitalising on different sites, for example choosing international schools for their offspring, or proactively switching ways of living, namely, actively engaging with the fast growing international community living in the Cyprus of today as opposed to interacting just with local Cypriots; many second-generation returnees have managed to tailor-make a 'lifestyle package' suited to them. Teerling recognises that British-born returnees are similar to other migrants (e.g. Hong-Kong) in their ability to switch and capitalise on different sites and pick elements of the culture. Yet ultimately, the account describes the pride and empowerment of British-born Cypriots who have successfully traded in the discontent they felt with life in Britain and the tug for change, (the central

reasons many chose relocation to Cyprus in the first place); for the benefits gained. By choosing at will when to act or be 'British', 'Cypriot' or 'international', returnees have realised that they are better able to adapt and integrate in their new home. Teerling argues that the plurality of forms of belonging – adopted by British-born returnees – points to the development of what she chooses to term a 'Third Cultural Space of Belonging'.

Thus Teerling situates her writing in the literature that recognises that we live in a world of hybridised cultures. She describes her participants with the rather in-eloquent term 'halfies' (individuals who combine in themselves a mixture of features resulting from migration, overseas education or parentage). Certainly, this quality of 'in-between-ness'; of being neither one nor the other (yet somehow both), seems to be the defining characteristic of the participants in question. The question really is not whether this characterisation is correct, but whether this feature is really as unique as is projected? The burgeoning literature of transnational studies and diaspora is rich in accounts of individuals who have learnt to combine and negotiate their multiple identities in a way that allows for them to play out their plural roles, and not only to survive, but thrive as well.

But not all British-born returnees to Cyprus have met with success. Popular discourse also tells stories of return migrants who did not make it on their return to Cyprus. Evidently, these individuals were not able to find a way to fit in and create alternative third spaces of belonging. Instead they felt dis-empowered because they could not find ways to integrate socially and emotionally. Realising that returning 'home' was not what had been projected by their memories or upbringing, they felt, or were made to feel by native Cypriots, like foreigners or outsiders in their ancestral homes. These tales of uncompromising failure have not been included in Teerling's account.

It is possible, that the ability of returnees to make it or not may be influenced in part by the time period of return. As Cyprus has become in recent years more global and European, returnees have taken advantage of this new multicultural framework to search out the third cultural spaces of belonging, they need to be comfortable. The same supportive structures were not in place twenty or thirty years ago to the same degree and to the same level of development. Furthermore, the younger generation, seem to be more adept at taking advantage of and building on these systems of support and searching for and ultimately finding their 'spaces'. They also appear less inclined to feel the need to succumb to the pressure of fulfilling the traditional role that older females in particular felt obliged to do. (Teerling has a brief note on the different perspective of female returnees in their 50s).

The importance of age and generation, are of course, assumptions that need to be explored further, opening up avenues for new research. But they beg the question, is the successful integration of British-born returnees that Teerling celebrates, merely a

generational phenomenon or a product of the globalised, fluid age we live in? Despite these lingering questions, Teerling's book is an enjoyable, thought provoking read, valuable for its rich, contemporary narratives and an excellent source for scholars of migration, diaspora studies and Cypriot society more generally.

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