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Citation for published version:

Hunter, A 2016, Emotional or instrumental? Narratives of home among North and West African seniors in France. in K Walsh & L Näre (eds), *Transnational Migration and Home in Older Age*. Routledge Research in Transnationalism, Routledge, New York; Abingdon, pp. 75-86.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Transnational Migration and Home in Older Age

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Emotional or Instrumental? Narratives of Home among North and West African Seniors in France

Journeying, mobility and migration have long been integral to ideas of home (Mallett 2004; Porteous 1976). Stretching back to the odyssey literature of the ancient Greeks, home has been conceived as the place to which one returns at the end of a journey (Moore 2000). By contrast, in 20th century Europe the ‘myth of return’ literature portrayed post-1945 labor migration as a one-way ticket, with the supposedly temporary guestworkers quickly settling and making a new home in Europe (Anwar 1979; Castles et al. 1984). In more recent times, however, migrants’ transnational practices have forced scholars to re-think this either/or relationship between home and away, between the ‘old country’ and adopted homeland (Al-Ali and Koser 2002; Blunt and Dowling 2006). Advances in transport and communications in terms of connectivity and affordability have enabled ever-increasing numbers of migrants to maintain regular and durable cross-border social, economic and political ties with non-migrant kin and associates in places of origin (Basch, Schiller and Szanton-Blanc 1994; Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999). Rather than the fate of ‘double absence’ which more pessimistically-inclined scholars foretold for Europe’s post-WW2 migrants (Sayad 1999), the growing potential for transnational engagement holds the promise of ‘double presence’, both in countries of origin and destination.

This chapter responds to Rapport and Overing’s enjoinder that in a world shaped by migrations and transnationalism, the concept of home needs re-defining in a manner that “transcends traditional ways by which identity is analytically classified and defined (according to locality, ethnicity, religiosity, or nationality)” (Rapport and Overing 2007, 176). The chapter will suggest three ways forward. Firstly, the case study of North and West African seniors in France which is offered here shows that sense of home is not only to be

conceived as emotional identification with a particular locality and/or ethnic, religious, national or kinship community (see Buffel and Phillipson this volume for a discussion). Rather, home may also be prized for the instrumental benefits it confers, such as access to high quality and affordable healthcare services (Gardner 2002), or housing support. To access such benefits, older migrants are obliged to respect minimum periods of residence in France. Secondly, the data analyzed in the chapter point to implications for migrants' self-conceptions of belonging and identity in later life. Although recognizing that identity and belonging are continuously negotiated throughout the lifecourse, the findings presented here indicate that retirement may be a critical juncture as older migrants are freed from the sedentary constraint of employment in the country of immigration and can re-assess which location(s) they wish to spend their retirement in. This is of central importance when considering the largely unexplored connections between home, migration and later life which this volume unpacks. The third and final contribution relates to the specific empirical focus of the chapter, namely older North and West African men living in migrant worker hostels in and around Paris. The history of the migrant hostels is little known outside France. Nonetheless, the legacy of this state-supported housing initiative aimed uniquely at migrant workers shows the long-term consequences and perils of short-term thinking in immigration and integration policy (Hunter 2012). Unlike many of their peers and compatriots in France, migrant hostel residents did not accomplish family reunification in the 1970s and 1980s. Instead they spent their working lives in France as 'geographically-single' migrants, unaccompanied by wives and children who remained in countries of origin, dependent on the migrants' earnings. The next section provides some contextual information on the history of the hostels and the ageing migrants who continue to live there.

Retirement Home? Migrant worker hostels and the question of late-in-life return

In most European countries which relied on migrant labor following WW2 the authorities were generally content to delegate responsibility for housing foreign workers to either employers or the forces of the private housing market. The approach of the French authorities was unusual, insofar as the state became directly involved in building and running hostel accommodation for single male migrant workers, with the first hostels opening in 1958. This occurred under the aegis of the state-run Sonacotral company (later rebranded as Adoma in 2007).¹ By 1974, some 680 hostels had been built, each typically housing 200-300 people, with a total capacity of some 170,000 beds nation-wide (Simon 1998, 46). Hostels tended to be located at the edge of urban and industrial areas, with accommodation generally in the form of very small single rooms of less than 8m². Given the supposedly temporary nature of the guestworkers' stay in France, the hostels were constructed on the cheap with materials that were not built to last. Paradoxically, however, the hostels remain in use today, some 40 or more years later, and what is more continue to house many of the original (now elderly) inhabitants, in conditions which generally are far from adapted to the needs of older people. While some residents have in time left the hostels, either to reunify with family in France or to return to countries of origin, a significant number have 'aged within the walls' of the hostels (Renaut 2006, 175, author's translation). As of 2007, one in two hostel residents was over 55 (Adoma 2007). In terms of national origins, around two-thirds are of North African origin (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia), with just under 30% hailing from Francophone West Africa (Mali, Senegal, Mauritania) (Renaut 2006).

In many ways the hostel residents have been archetypal transnational migrants, thanks to their life-long remittances, regular return visits, and frequent communication with stay-at-home relatives (via fixed-line telephones and latterly SMS text messaging). Unsurprisingly, given

the importance which they ascribed to these activities, 'home' was a very central feature of the narratives of these elders. Throughout their long sojourn in France, they had cherished the dream of returning for good 'one day'. Many had promised themselves and their families that they would return following retirement. Indeed retirement is an auspicious juncture for return: the sedentary constraint of earning a living in France no longer applies, and hostel residents are able to draw their French state pensions back home, thanks to bilateral social security agreements concluded between France and migrant sending countries.

Yet at retirement the migration decisions of many hostel residents are puzzling. Instead of definitive return to their families, most older hostel residents prefer to circulate regularly between the hostel in France and the country of origin, spending longer or shorter periods of the year in both locations. Surveys have found that between 80 and 95 per cent of hostel residents travel back-and-forth between France and countries of origin at retirement (Bitatsi Trachet and El Moubaraki 2006; Sonacotra 2006). Beyond affective ties, this behavior is also puzzling from an economic perspective: older migrant hostel residents remain unmoved by the financial incentives of a return homewards, where their euro-denominated pension income has far greater purchasing power compared with the breadline subsistence which the same pensions afford in France. The older hostel residents' frequent back-and-forth moves challenge the assumption that late-in-life return is the definitive end of the labour migration trajectory (see Warnes 2009 for a discussion).

Research Design

What explains this preference for back-and-forth mobility over definitive return at retirement? To answer this question I undertook multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in

France, Morocco, Senegal, and in transit on routes frequented by hostel residents during their back-and-forth trips, between 2007 and 2009. My research began with a six-month period visiting a handful of hostels in a northern Paris suburb. I spent one afternoon a week in each site, work-shadowing an employee from a migrants' rights NGO which provides legal and administrative advice to residents. I followed this with a three-month period as a live-in resident in one hostel, after which I was privileged to witness the family life of two respondents in Morocco and Senegal respectively, as an invited guest in their family homes. In addition to participant observation, I conducted interviews with 30 older hostel residents representing a range of ages, nationalities, and employment situations. These interviews were based on the biographical interpretive method (Chamberlayne et al. 2000). A further 50 interviews were conducted with a range of service providers who regularly engage with hostel residents, such as medical professionals, care providers, and hostel staff. The rationale behind this multi-methods approach was that in order to understand the patterns and consequences of hostel residents' mobility in the present, not only should I experience this (im)mobility for myself, but I should also have knowledge of my respondents' past lives (in terms of mobility, employment, family and so on).

My fieldwork revealed that hostel residents have strong attachments both to France and to places of origin, and that these attachments have significant implications for how they conceptualize home in later life. The narratives of the hostel residents indicate that they relate to multiple homes. On the one hand, their narratives conform to conventional conceptions of home, based on community- and/or place-attachment, as summarized in the next section. Such narratives are expressed primarily in relation to family and community in countries of origin. I refer to these narratives as expressing *emotional home*. Yet hostel residents' testimony also revealed a deep level of attachment to and reliance on healthcare and other

provisions which their inclusion in the French welfare state afforded. Time and again, I was struck by the importance of such services in structuring and ‘timetabling’ the men’s lives. I label this second form of attachment *instrumental home*, a concept which I argue has the potential to enrich our understanding of what home can mean, both in the context of migration and in the context of ageing.

Theories of Home: moving beyond community- and place- attachment

Academic literature has tended to conceptualize home in terms of attachment either to a locality or space, or as attachment to a social group or community (be this on the basis of kinship, ethnicity or nationality). Regarding the former, J. D. Porteous’ oft-cited article ‘Home: the territorial core’ is one example from a human geography perspective:

[Home] is preferred space, and it provides a fixed point of reference around which the individual may personally structure his or her spatial reality (Porteous 1976, 390).

Others, however, have argued that to be ‘at home in the world’ is less about place and more about the social relations which occur in a given place (Jackson 1995). Liisa Malkki (1992) critiques what she sees as the taken-for-granted essentialist territorialization of national identity (roots) and contends that migrants and refugees re-invent home through forging multiple cosmopolitan identities and attachments both to people and place. By contrast, in more ‘traditionalist’ interpretations home is equated with kinship relations and the domestic family dwelling (Fesenmyer this volume). Proponents of such a perspective maintain that home and family are so tightly bound that the “terms are almost interchangeable” (Mallett 2004, 73). Among my respondents in the hostels, narratives equating home with location of

immediate family were prominent. Rather than referring to their countries of birth, respondents tended to begin their narratives about places of origin with ‘chez nous’ (in our house or place) or ‘au village’ (back in the village).

However, more striking still was the readiness with which older hostel residents proffered justifications for their continued presence in France. These rationales were offered unbidden and often within a few minutes of meeting. Almost invariably, hostel residents would justify their presence in France on the grounds of administrative and healthcare requirements, revealing the importance of French medical and bureaucratic organizations in the men’s lives. Inclusion in such organizations is the setting for what I will elaborate here as *instrumental home*. *Instrumental home* involves two pre-requisite components: the first is spatial, the second is temporal.

The spatial element is the concept of ‘domicile’. In order to be eligible for state-subsidized healthcare, or various allowances to which pensioners are entitled, the older hostel residents have to prove that their primary residence, or domicile, is in France. The hostel residents’ rationales gave me pause for reflection: did the requirements of domicile have implications for theorizing home? The etymological connection between home and domicile is evident given the latter word’s Latin roots, from *domicilium* ‘dwelling’, in turn from *domus* ‘home’. According to dictionary definitions, domicile in modern English usage can signify “a person’s home” as well as “the country in which a person has permanent residence” (OED), giving it purchase on the multi-scalar nature of home upon which many authors have insisted (Blunt 2005). Thus far, however, the term has been used primarily in legal and fiscal contexts. What has been far less explored is the potential of the term domicile as a conceptual tool for unpacking the notion of home. One exception, however, is Alison Blunt’s work on

the mixed-descent Anglo-Indian or ‘domiciled’ community in colonial-era India. My focus on the term domicile differs somewhat from Blunt, who uses the term in a broader way to invoke geographies of home, residence and settlement, whereas I take domicile to mean the specific spatial setting of *instrumental home*, i.e. the administrative territorial unit where one resides in order to benefit from a given service or welfare allocation.

The temporal component of *instrumental home* refers to the ‘timetabling’ effect which administrative agencies have on individuals, thanks to the eligibility conditions which the former impose on the latter in order to benefit from a given service or welfare allocation. In the case of the migrant worker hostels, the older residents were required to observe a minimum period of residence on French territory, ranging from six to nine months depending on the administrative conditions attached to the social security program in question. In effect, the French welfare state ‘timetabled’ their presence in France. Such temporal demands are referred to by Saulo Cwerner (2001) in his study of Brazilian migrants in London as ‘heteronomous times’: these are externally imposed temporal conditions which are largely beyond migrants’ control, such as the expiry date of a student visa or work permit. The next section will document three specific instances where the requirements of domicile and timetabling result in different manifestations of *instrumental home* for older hostel residents.

Instrumental Home: the importance of domicile and timetabling

Time and again, I was struck by the readiness with which hostel residents discussed their reasons for being in France: it was as if they felt compelled to explain or justify their presence. Almost invariably, administrative or healthcare requirements featured strongly in their rationales. One Algerian hostel resident, when I informed him that I was doing a study

on retired people living in migrant worker hostels, hurriedly declared: “We are only here for healthcare.” Hamid (70, Taroudant, Morocco)² was very firm about why the older North Africans are still here: “the only thing is healthcare”. Ferouah, a Moroccan in his 60s, commented: “If I come to France, it is for administrative reasons. These last few days, I was renewing my residence card.”

Such initial justifications indicated an instrumental form of attachment to France, which I was keen to analyze further. My subsequent fieldwork identified three particular manifestations of *instrumental home* as crucial for the hostel residents. These are (i) completing the annual tax declaration form; (ii) meeting conditions of ‘regular and effective residence’ for welfare benefits; and (iii) accessing medical care, especially consultations and prescription drugs. I will take each in turn.

A first manifestation of *instrumental home* relates to a particularity of the French tax system. Every year in May, all individuals whose principal residence is France are required to complete and sign their Tax Declaration (*Déclaration des Impôts*). Crucially, the form is only sent to addresses in April and must be returned by the end of May. The requirement to be at one’s domicile in France at this time is an exemplary manifestation of bureaucratic timetabling, incorporating both temporal and territorial demands. The tax declaration is a *sine qua non* of French administrative documentation since it is used as a proof, not only of residence (i.e., residence for tax purposes), but also of income, and therefore crucial for proving eligibility for means-tested benefits. It is entirely unsurprising then that the period March-May is the peak period in terms of hostel occupancy (Unafo 2006). Many residents mentioned this as a motive for their periodic return trips, and hostel managers too were very aware of the importance of this time of year:

The period when they all come back is when there is the tax declaration to do. They have to be here to do the declaration and sign the papers. Apart from this period then which is March-May, there is no other peak time, it keeps ticking over (Denis, hostel manager).

A second manifestation of *instrumental home* is found in the eligibility criteria for means-tested old-age income benefit. Individuals aged 65 and over in receipt of modest pensions are eligible for the *minimum vieillesse* (old-age minimum income), which tops up the general regime pension to a certain minimum income, set at €708.95 per month in 2010 when this research was completed. Receiving the *minimum vieillesse* is conditional upon France being the 'principal and habitual' place of residence, necessitating at least six months' stay in France. Here the temporal and territorial demands of the welfare state become plain to see.

A third manifestation of *instrumental home* is predicated on hostel residents' relationship with the French healthcare system. The availability in places of origin of medicines prescribed for chronic conditions has a bearing on the frequency and regularity of residents' back-and-forth trips. Among my respondents, this issue was most crucial for those who are diabetic. Kader (70s, Mostaghanem, Algeria) has diabetes but the type of insulin he uses is not available where he lives in Algeria, so he regularly returns to France to renew his prescription. Previously pharmacists in France were empowered to authorize up to six months of medication for those suffering chronic illnesses, but the maximum period which can now be authorized is three months.

Appointments with doctors and consultants also had a strong influence on my respondents' residence preferences. In epidemiological terms, the health of hostel residents as a group does not deviate markedly relative to other older persons in France. Aside from a higher prevalence of diabetes, hostel residents experience similar exposure to the common diseases and conditions affecting all French seniors. What does distinguish hostel residents however is the earlier incidence of health problems, primarily due to exposure to harsh working conditions and work accidents (Hadjiat and Fevotte 2008). It is therefore not surprising that over time many hostel residents have forged close relationships with their GPs and other health professionals. Importantly, however, medical professionals were not only valued by my respondents for their clinical expertise. Just as important were the relationships of trust which they had developed over the years with their GPs, such that my respondents were wary of consultations with an unfamiliar doctor: "they prefer to not break with their doctors and their medical appointments" (Lassana, 50, Tambacounda, Senegal).

Emotional Home: where the heart (and the hurt) is

As discussed above, a common approach in the literature has been to consider affective ties to place, family and community as constitutive of home, a perspective which I label *emotional home*. Certainly among my respondents in the hostels, narratives equating home with location of immediate family were prominent. For example, Issa (70), from Tambacounda region in Senegal, expressed the loss he feels at not being at home with his family:

I have lost something because my children aren't there with me... Now that I'm old, I can't work. With my pension, what I earn isn't enough to enable me to live with my children, my wife, and I lack something because of that.

Hostel residents' narratives stressed the (gender-normative) breadwinner role and the obligation they were under to send money and other material goods to loved ones back home. Indeed, sending remittances has been a way of life since the older hostel residents first arrived in France: it has been the "ultimate purpose" of the migratory project (Barou 2001). The motivation to remit is often explained as being predicated on an altruistic concern for the wellbeing of loved ones back home (see Stark 1991 for discussion). Others conceive of remittances as an offering to atone for absence (Aggoun 2006), and the men's ascetic lifestyles in the hostels certainly bear this out. One respondent, Hamid (70, Taroudant, Morocco), detailed the extent of his financial responsibilities for stay-at-home relatives, including adult children who, despite Hamid's investments in their education, are long-term unemployed. Indeed he reported – with some pride – sending money to the families of his brothers and sisters also. "It does good. It's important to give to one's relatives."

My fieldwork revealed that hostel residents communicated with stay-at-home relatives more often than in the past, thanks to the wider availability of communications technology such as mobile phones in places of origin. However, these exchanges with relatives were not always characterized by affection but instead centered on the ever-increasing dependency of the stay-at-home household on the older migrants' remittances. This was particularly the case for residents whose stay-at-home adult children were un(der)employed with families of their own to support.

Excuse my language, but we have become slaves – of ourselves. Because when you have a child and that child gets married, you have to work for the grandchildren too... It's true that it's my family, but I'm exploited all the same, because I don't have a choice. Well, if they have bills to pay, it's me who pays, because they don't have anyone else. (Saleem, 60, Tiznit, Morocco)

The above quote shows that the place of origin figured as an *emotional home* where affective relationships were centered, although not always unproblematically. Resonating with the work of Bryceson and Vuorela (2002), prolonged separation and the dependency of stay-at-home relatives on the elder breadwinner's remittances sometimes generated conflicts within families along gender and generational lines, with wives and children wresting authority from absent husbands and fathers (see also Fesenmyer this volume). This could lead to difficulties of communication and intimacy during return visits, calling into question the viability of a more permanent return to the family home. "A woman is like a wallet" said one, "she keeps your money." After a certain time away from the village, "One loses one's bearings as the head of the household. Likewise the wife has lost the habit of living together" (Souleymane, 50s, Mauritania). As a result, some men only stay for a few months back home, because they get annoyed with their families. "We get fed up, and decide to come back to France" (Kemal, 63, Algeria).

It might be tempting to interpret the above testimony from respondents as merely disgruntled husbands grumbling about their ungrateful wives and children. At times this was discernible in my discussions with older hostel residents, but overall their discourse cannot be passed off as mere grumpiness. There was a considerably heightened level of emotion when some men talked about their "enslavement", "exploitation", "pressures" and "responsibilities" which went beyond minor gripes and whingeing. The tenor of such words is enough to make that clear. That said, it would be an exaggeration to depict an invariably conflictual scenario in the family life of my respondents. I was privileged indeed to witness several family reunions during my fieldwork in Morocco and Senegal, and these were always occasions of great joy

and warmth. The fact that such a large proportion of hostel residents continued to regularly visit their families in places of origin also indicates enduring bonds of affection.

Conclusion

Two narratives of home emerged in the accounts of older North and West Africans living in migrant worker hostels in France. Places of origin figured as an *emotional home* where affective relationships with family members were centered (although not always unproblematically). The *emotional home* perspective encapsulates more conventional approaches to home based on place-attachment or kin group-attachment (Porteous 1976; Mallett 2004). In this perspective, the remittances sent back by hostel residents functioned not only as a material lifeline but also as a symbolic currency to compensate for having postponed (or renounced) the original promise and dream to return to one's family for good one day. France, on the other hand, also figured as 'home' – but generally of a more instrumental kind – where hostel residents accessed healthcare and other welfare provisions. Such provision was contingent on being domiciled in France for a stipulated length of time. In this way, their presence in France, the domicile, can be said to be timetabled.

While the foregoing indicates that *emotional home* in the case of the hostel residents is primarily associated with the place of origin, and *instrumental home* with the country of immigration, this dichotomy is not necessarily always so clear-cut. As was described above, the embodied experience of regularly visiting trusted GPs and other health professionals was not only valued for its objective clinical benefits, but also for the subjective comfort and reassurance provided. By contrast, such comfort and reassurance could not always be taken for granted during their periodic return visits to stay-at-home families. Equally, analyzing the

experiences of other migrants through the lens of emotional and instrumental home is likely to reveal quite different orientations to ancestral or adopted homelands, for example transnational entrepreneurs whose close relatives live in France but whose business interests are domiciled in Morocco for administrative purposes. Similarly, emotional attachments to places of origin may weaken over the lifecourse, as Botterill (this volume) shows in her study of British lifestyle migrants in Thailand.

While *emotional home* corresponds to conventional conceptualizations of home based on group- and place-attachment, *instrumental home* has the potential to enrich our understanding of what home can mean. Identifying with a particular location as an *instrumental home* becomes more salient as migrants' transnational practices become more widespread, facilitated by affordable international travel and advances in communications technology (Ali-Ali and Koser 2002; Portes et al. 1999). Instrumental home also becomes more salient in the context of demographic ageing. This is because access to healthcare and other social security entitlements become increasingly important in later life. In turn, proofs of identity and eligibility, such as payslips and social security credentials, take on a new importance at retirement, becoming increasingly important markers of self-hood. In the case of France's migrant worker hostels, the older residents are required to undergo a shift whereby administrative papers replace work as the basis for their social identity. According to one of my respondents: "[Hostel residents] have to quit this identity of 'worker' – which is an identity made of flesh and bone, an identity made from work with their body – for an identity of papers. They have to prove their presence in France, they have to prove their entitlement to a pension" (interview with union official). *Instrumental home* may not command the same thick loyalties that more emotional attachments to particular places and communities invoke. Nonetheless, the concept of *instrumental home* potentially opens up interesting new

perspectives on the largely unexplored interaction between transnational migration and belonging later in life.

Notes

¹ The Sonacotral acronym stood for *Société nationale de construction de logements pour les travailleurs algériens* (National Housing Construction Company for Algerian Workers). Initially, the state's rationale for constructing migrant worker hostels was based on security concerns: the large numbers of Algerian workers resident in France in the late 1950s and early 1960s were seen as a 'fifth column' in the context of the Algerian war of independence. Once the war was over, hostels were favoured because the relatively cheap rents permitted more remittances to be sent, thereby discouraging migrant workers from reunifying their families in France. Hostels were also used to facilitate urban planning objectives, such as the clearance of slum and shantytown areas where many low-paid workers (migrant and non-migrant alike) were forced to live given the acute shortage of affordable housing after WW2 (Bernardot 1999; Viet 1999).

² Henceforth, the age and origin of all cited respondents is formulated according to the following character key: pseudonym (age, region of origin, country of origin). Some respondents, were not able to give their age with any accuracy because of irregularities or delays in registering with the authorities in their countries of origin, , especially in more rural areas. In such cases, age is given approximately, e.g. 50s, 70s, etc.

Acknowledgements

This chapter is based on research funded by an ESRC 1+3 Studentship (Award no. PTA-031-2005-00223). In addition, the author gratefully acknowledges comments from Katie Walsh, Lena Näre and Loretta Baldassar on earlier versions of this paper.

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