

10 Take Off: Mobile Perspectives

With this chapter, we leave the Montreal-based ethnography behind. In the following, we will travel to or return to Jamaica with the women of this study. Here we look into the mobility process itself that raises questions such as “Which preparations occurred before departure? Who needs to be notified before coming home? How was the traveling process itself?”. The experience of accompanying the interlocutors on their homeland travels and returns was a multi-layered, yet, holistic process that involved a broad range of before, during and after communication and interconnected dynamics involving various people, anticipation, moving to Jamaica, on-site experiences, going back and post-travel recollections. As Watts and Urry state, “Mobile ethnography involves traveling with people and things, participating in their continual shift through time, place and relations with others” (2008: 867). Here the ethnography again follows the actual course of the fieldwork, which started in the urban environment of Montreal and then took off via plane from Montreal or Toronto to the Jamaican island. Watts and Urry (2008) identify the traveling time as a ‘liminal space’ between ‘here’ and ‘there’ that needs consideration when researching migratory mobility. This liminal space of traveling brings the anticipations to a climax while pre-communications and preparations are silenced or finished. Moving together with the interlocutors enriched the analysis since a broader understanding of their mobility strategies evolved.

Instead of just meeting them at specific points in time, I was part of an entire process. The sites I observed and visited resulted in field notes and photographs. The photographs were again relevant for the discussion of the post-travel recollections with the research partners. Anticipation, memories, and expectations constructed before traveling and returning, strongly influence the ‘local knowledge’, for example in terms of the ways my interlocutors experience Jamaica, its people, and their (extended) families. As we will see post-traveling, individuals then remember only particular events or situations and tend to forget or overlook negative experiences after some time passes by, which results in recurring travels. In this sense, local experiences altogether influence future travel and migratory intentions as well as future anticipation and expectations.

10.1 Flying Home

In two years, Ms. Brown will receive her well-deserved pension and can follow her dream to return to Jamaica. Even though she is still indecisive about leaving behind her friends and beloved apartment in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. Today, 23 years after her last trip to the island, Ms. Brown finally flies back home to her place of ‘heart’. On this trip, she will find out if her family used her longstanding payments and remittances to further build, maintain and furnish her part of the “dream house”, the inherited home of her beloved grandmother and place of retirement. Ms. Brown arrives at precisely 4:30 a.m. in front of the Air Transat section of Toronto Pearson International Airport. She waves excitedly and screams my name while making her way through the crowd. Behind her “a cousin” as she refers to the young man, who pushes a luggage cart with three huge suitcases and a large handbag piled so high he could hardly be seen. Stylish as ever, in a lime green two-piece dress suit, golden sandals, her hair, and nails freshly done and decorated with jewellery and with a nervous look on her face, the 63-year-old woman stands before me. Today December 9, 2016 marks over twenty years that she has not been ‘home’ to Jamaica.

“I’ll have to pay for overweight”, she laughs while we make our way to the check-in counter and continues in deep Jamaican Patois in which she often changes at will: “Mi cyan reach from foreign and no bring nutten fi dem”¹. “Dem”, her younger sister Jodi and her entire family have been anticipating her arrival for months in the little countryside town where she grew up with her grandmother. The waiting area is jam-packed with tourists and Jamaicans, who are all ready to escape the Canadian winter. The noisy airport loudspeaker announces a 45-minute delay shortly before boarding. Ms. Brown’s smile fades “typical” she grunts and shows her disapproval with a sound made by sucking air through her front teeth. This “kissing of the teeth” is a typical non-verbal communication form in Jamaica that many people use when they are not pleased with a situation or person. While we wait, suddenly they roll in. The first one is hardly noticeable, then the second, the third one strikes our attention until sixteen elderly people in sixteen wheelchairs park in front of the priority-boarding lane of our flight. “Dem fly home fi dead”, whispers Ms. Brown in my ear, “you see, that’s why mi waan go from early mi nah waan do dis”²

The turbines howl loudly. “Oh pupa Jesus, please make this plane yah reach safe!” Ms. Brown prays nervously with folded hands as the plane starts to get ready for take-off. We are seated like Jamaican ‘tinned mackerels’, under my feet Ms. Brown’s oversized handbag because her seat neighbour, a Jamaican engineer from

1 Translation: I cannot come home from Canada and have no gifts for the family.

2 Translation: They fly home to die, you understand, that’s why I want to leave Canada now I don’t want to do this.

Mississauga, also brought several different sized pieces of luggage, similar to the rest of the passengers who all seem to be traveling with overweight luggage today. Ms. Brown talks a lot, not only to the engineer, who is flying home for Christmas, but also with an older Jamaican man sitting on the next aisle seat beside us and with a young mother sitting in the seat in front of her. The flight is one merry, loud chatter of small talk. The topics are diverse, but are certainly about Jamaica. After a short and uncomfortable three hours and fifty minutes, we belatedly touch the ground. “You smell it, darling? We reach, we reach!” hums Ms. Brown cheerfully right after stepping out of the aircraft. “Yeah, Jamaica” winks the old man from the aisle seat, a big smile on his wrinkly face.

At the baggage claim area, Ms. Brown heaves her three suitcases from a wild cluster of luggage stacked upon each other. Before that, we had to wait almost an hour in the seemingly never-ending line of immigration control. “Welcome to Jamaica”, she chuckles “what a mess”. After we finally got through with our search for luggage and the sheer never-ending waiting time at immigration, a solid wall of sultry-hot air confronts us as we leave the airport building in Montego Bay. “Wha gwaan foreigner?”³ Jodi shouts cheerfully, running towards Ms. Brown, who instantly starts to weep for joy when she sees her sister, followed by joyous hugging and chattering. “We see us, next week girl, thanks for coming along”, Ms. Brown waves to me out of the moving vehicle and drives off to the countryside, while I make my way to the taxi stand.

10.2 The Festive Season

“I am so glad it’s this time of the year again”, Carol sings happily, bending down over a large suitcase stuffed with a variety of food containers, clothes, shoes and wrapped up presents. It is nearly two weeks until Christmas. Carol is packing her ‘souvenirs’ for her stay-behind family in Jamaica. At least twice a year she travels ‘home’, for vacation and visiting her family and friends. In the winter, their dates to ‘go down’ are always fixed a year in advance. Carol’s family has to leave the ‘freezer’, as she calls Toronto during winter, at least for three weeks during the Christmas season.

While wrapping up some t-shirts in paper printed with snowflakes, she talks non-stop about the beach, the warm climate, the sunshine, mangoes, pears (the Jamaican word for avocados), fried fish, curried goat and her need for relaxation and enjoyment. “On top of everything I need to know what a gwaan⁴”, Carol declares

3 Translation: How are you/ What’s new foreigner?

4 Translation: Above all, I need to know what’s new/ what’s going on.

zipping up one of her suitcases while sitting on top of it. Her periodic visits to Jamaica do not only serve as homeland and roots vacations but also foster meaningful relationships she has with local friends and extended family, whom she misses a lot. Similar to Ms. Brown's case the buying of gifts is essential before departing, not only during the Christmas season. "I always support my family, I mean, I send money and it's only appropriate to bring some gifts, you see [...]. Jamaica is hard, trust me, we need to help", says Carol.

Carol explains that her stay-behind family more or less expects the 'foreigners' to bring things from abroad to support the local part of the household with various items from clothes, school materials, foreign food products, cosmetics to toys and baby articles. Carol's return visits are well prepared and organized as she even has the most distant cousin on her checklist of gift receivers. Gifts and monetary support both function as reciprocal payments for the caring and hosting of Carol and her husband during their stay on the island. Furthermore, these ties are relevant if Carol wanted to return permanently one day. "You never know what happens", she always says. Hence, roots traveling facilitates future return intentions and re-constructs the local benchmark against what is 'heard' or remembered while being in Canada. In that sense, Carol's seasonal visits are not only crucial for herself and her family, but also for others in the Canadian diaspora whom Carol informs about local news. "Here, help me with that one", commands Carol and points at the next large piece of luggage, "this is the one with the presents from other people". Puzzled, I ask her what she means by "other people", it quickly becomes clear that Carol does not only carry items for her own family but also additionally brings gifts and remittances (cash) on behalf of others, who are unable to travel to Jamaica, for example, due to their immigrant status. "Without these lists [points at three different neatly hand-written papers], I would completely lose track of everything that I have to bring. So now help", she urges, "take this nice watch from aunty Ruby and roll it in a pair of socks, immigration does not need to find everything we bring", she chuckles and continues packing. We organize the luggage until late at night. The next morning we leave for the airport early to check in six huge suitcases, three of which are packed with presents, and take off to Kingston's Norman Manley airport.

10.3 Coming Here to Stay

"I am boarding now, so see you at the airport in a few", Elisha shouts through the WhatsApp video, calling me from Montreal's airport. Five hours later, I'm waiting in front of Montego Bay's crowded airport exit gate, making my way through many suitcases, travellers, tourists, hotel concierges and shouting taxi drivers. I arrived in Jamaica a week prior to Elisha and today marks the starting point of her endeavour to 'return' to the land of her ancestors. Before her and my arrival in Jamaica, we

coordinated our trip and Elisha laid out plans about all the things she wanted to do during her first four weeks on the island, which seemed like a task for a lifetime. Even though Elisha knew the island from regular holiday trips with her family as a child and teenager, it quickly became apparent that organizing the trip and traveling alone in Jamaica was something that worried her a lot. The preparations and also the process of ‘who to inform ahead of time’ was of great significance before she travelled. Especially her maternal aunt was a crucial part of her arrangements, which meant the conducting of numerous phone calls, texts as well as video messages. Two weeks before her departure, she asked me to take over the planning of the first two nights and the organization of our rental car. Firstly, because I was already there, and secondly, because Elisha was not sure if she wanted to drive by herself since she feared Jamaican roads. I quickly realized that I had more local knowledge in terms of infrastructural and contextual knowledge of, e.g. bargaining with vendors. However, as best as I could, I held back this knowledge in most situations on our travels in order to not affecting her experiences and the overall course of the trip.

“I’m here”, Elisha screams across the airport hall, which leads some people to crane their necks in her direction to see what happened. After meeting, we made our way to the car rental, which is located directly inside the airport hall. After a waiting time of nearly one and a half hours, we drive off to our first stop on the North Coast.

